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Urban Kali: From Sacred Dance to Secular Performance

Rakini Devi
University of Wollongong

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UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
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Urban Kali: From Sacred Dance to Secular Performance

Rakini Devi

This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the conferral of the degree:

Doctor of Creative Arts

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Research Training Program Scholarship.

Supervisors

Emeritus Professor Diana Wood Conroy and Professor Sarah Miller

The University of Wollongong
The School of Art and Media
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Abstract

The premise of my doctoral research is to ask how sacred Hindu iconography in traditional Indian classical dance might translate to secular, feminist performance. Similar to a choreographic design, the practical creative work and the theoretical research engage in a 'duet' of movement back and forth, both sharing a strong gestural motif that reinforces the central theme of "sacred to secular", and "tradition as transgression". The thesis will establish my relationship to Goddess Kali phenomena as my cultural milieu, both past and present, and situate my practice in the context of other global practitioners.

Artists who demonstrate precedents of my practice include Indian choreographer and dancer, Chandralekha (b. 1928 - 2006), performance artists including American Carolee Schneeman (b. 1939), Japanese born Yoko Ono (b. 1933) and Serbian-born Marina Abramovic (b. 1946), as well as American photographic artist, Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) who all employ often confrontational and sometimes violent imagery in their work.

In tracing Kali from pre-colonial to postcolonial India, drawing on Indian scholar David R. Kinsley (b. 1939 - 2000), this thesis will explore the evolution of Kali iconography to embrace subjects beyond sacred ritual and tradition that challenge attitudes of racial stereotyping, identity, culture, and predominantly as protest to attitudes of female shame. Because the momentum of my practice addresses both feminist and intercultural theories, it draws on Indian scholarship such as the feminist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (b. India 1942), activist Mala Sen (b. 1947-2011) and intercultural scholar Rustom Bharucha (b.1953) whose writing underpin the exegesis. An autoethnographic approach (Ellis, C et al., 2011, p.1) links the threads of the scholarly enquiry. The creative research, the performance work, *Urban Kali*, extends the concept of tradition as transgression, and explores the tensions between the sacred and the secular through what might be described as contemporary feminist intercultural performance. The research suggests that contemporary performance utilising traditional Kali iconography can transcend and subvert cultural significance to express and embody feminine identity.

Acknowledgments

I have always claimed that I have been under the protection of two mothers. My strongest female influence was my Burmese mother Daw Khin May Gyi, and the other is my spiritual mother, Ma Kali, both instilling in me the passion and spirit of Shakti, or feminine power. The strong feminine influence in my life has extended to this doctoral project, which would not have been possible without the guidance and support from some key women.

Firstly, I would like to thank my principal supervisor, Emeritus Professor Diana Wood Conroy, for her wisdom, unwavering encouragement, moral and academic support and inspiration throughout the process of my candidature. Her considerable experience in supporting artists in academic study, her generosity of spirit, grace, and ongoing artistic accomplishments are attributes that will continue to inspire me in the future.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Background to *Urban Kali: From Sacred dance to Secular Performance*.

All performances in my repertoire named in this thesis appear in an annotated appendix at the end of this document.

1.1. Background to the project

This thesis comprises the creative research project-the performance, *Urban Kali*, accompanied by an exegesis. The thesis asks whether traditional Hindu iconography, and in particular, representations of the goddess, Kali, can be meaningfully employed in contemporary performance as a means of unsettling or transgressing tradition. Consequently, the principal argument explored through this research project is the concept of "tradition as transgression". It is an idea that seeks to describe my methodology, which employs classical Indian dance culture as the foundation for creating a secular performance language, utilising Kali iconography. This concept is also informed by the work of other artists working with performance, who will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

Contemporary interpretations of Hindu iconography, specifically of the goddess Kali, who is the primary deity worshipped in my birthplace Kolkata, have become emblematic in my individual and possibly idiosyncratic performance practice. My motivation for creating work using Kali iconography is to challenge historical and contemporary understandings of the intercultural female body. In describing my work as "hybrid-intercultural", this exegesis seeks to investigate how, by using gesture, costume and painting, I have subverted or transformed sacred dance traditions in order to construct a secular performance language, that transcends classical traditions in order to communicate with contemporary audiences from diverse backgrounds.

Also fundamental to this research project, is my adoption of Kali iconography as a protest against misogynist attitudes and atrocities committed against women and girls, particularly in India, as an example of similar misogyny in other countries. This exegesis attributes such acts and attitudes in India to a deeply rooted cultural conditioning of female shame, prevalent in India and throughout many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures. It is common practice for Indian mothers to name the female sex "shame", reinforcing the devaluation of the female. This exegesis has drawn on a number of scholarly sources in order to extend my understanding of female shame and the contexts and social mores in which such concepts flourish.

The gender preference for male children has led to female foeticide and infanticide, a subject I first addressed in my work *Suttee*¹ (PICA, Perth 1992, and in *The Virtual Goddess* National Tour 1997, and *Disturbing Elements*, Carlton Courthouse, Melbourne, 2009), which also dealt with *sati* (widow immolation), and "dowry deaths" both practices that continue unabated today, and are in most cases linked to the practice of dowry, which requires the father of daughters to pay large sums of money and gifts to the groom's family, a tradition that particularly impacts on impoverished families.² Vrinda Grover, a leading lawyer and women's rights campaigner on misogynist Indian crimes said dowry death "is rampant in India", commenting that dowry death cases can only be registered up to seven years after marriage, which means most of those killed were young women and relatively new brides. "Grave violence is being committed against young women in their matrimonial homes and the low conviction rate shows the legal system is not geared up to investigate and prosecute these cases," she said. (*The Telegraph*, New Delhi, September

¹ "Suttee" was the British colonial spelling of *Sati*, and both are used in this exegesis. Using the former spelling for my 1992 production of *Suttee* distinguishes it from my discourse on the practice of widow immolation and the Hindu Goddess, consort of Lord Shiva, named Sati. In Hindu mythology, Sati threw herself into a sacrificial fire in protest of her father's insult to her husband Shiva. Thus, the act of widow immolation is named after her.

² In Chapter Five of this exegesis, I describe how I used a film sequence and text to draw attention to female infanticide (which is a consequence of the dowry system) in the new creative work, *Urban Kali*.

2013). These misogynist Indian crimes (sati and dowry deaths) are examples of culturally specific issues have been a primary motivation for my performance activism.

The attitude towards shame and restraint, so prevalent in Indian society's censorship of women and the feminine, is inherent in my Burmese /Indian cultural heritage, and impacted on me from an early age.³ Preference for sons is an accepted attitude, leading to the ongoing practice of female foeticide and infanticide in modern India. China's "one child" policy resulted in similar practices. Nancy Quian describes how the enforcement of this policy in 1980 made second births forbidden, and that acts of forced abortion, sterilization and female infanticide became widespread (Quian 2017, pp.4-5). The One Child policy ended in 2015, and while Indian cases of female infanticide and foeticide are driven mainly by the crippling costs of the dowry system, the problem of gender selection is very much prevalent in modern India, a situation that this thesis addresses later in more detail.

In the context of female shame, the writing of Lebanese born, American scholar Fedwa Malti-Douglas whose book, *Men Women and God(s) Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (1995), introducing me to the work of Egyptian feminist writer, activist, physician and psychiatrist Nawal El Saadawi (born 1931) has been extremely helpful, particularly in her discussion of the practice of female genital mutilation. Malti Douglas quotes El Saadawi, using the term *awrat*,⁴ to describe female genitalia as "something shameful, defective, and imperfect" (1995, p.27). This is not dissimilar to the way female shame is experienced in Indian culture. Similarly, Johnson and Moran's edited collection of essays, *The Female Face of Shame* (2013) addresses the problem of the gendered construction of shame, and includes contributions by women from diverse cultures. Subjects central to

³ As the youngest of three daughters, I was always cherished and valued by my parents, but this was not the case for many of my friends from different religious and cultural backgrounds, including my mother's Burmese, and predominantly patriarchal upbringing.

⁴ The term *awrat* is also the Hindustani word for "woman".

this exegesis are not only the impact of British colonial India, but also the post-colonial era in Indian culture, specifically in relation to classical Indian dance, including Hindu dance culture and performing arts.

I have drawn on these accounts as evidence to support my contention that female shame is socially constructed, most often perpetuated through concepts such as family "honour" and national identity. However, female shame is not exclusive to Indian culture, and this exegesis seeks to investigate the growing trend of female shaming in western society. While my employment of visually performative representations of Kali iconography may be culturally specific, the intention is also to draw attention to the distorted images of women perpetuated by a relentless and seemingly all-pervasive media and a lucrative worldwide obsession with pornography and paedophilia, enabled by a culture of social networking. My earlier performance works that protest cultural taboo and female shame such as *Suttee* (1992 and 1998) and *Disturbing Elements* (2008) drew on the feminist writings of Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak but for the purposes of this exegesis, I am particularly interested in her discourse on the devaluation of Indian women, Indian feminism, and cultural misinformation on these subjects.

Central to this thesis is my lived experience of immigration and living between two cultures, often characterised in terms of "east" and "west". As a classically trained Indian dancer and artist, my response to this lived complexity has been to create a corporeal language that draws on various rituals and the symbolic, employing the stylised gesture so familiar to Indian dance towards a resolutely contemporary performance outcome. My sense of my own practice resonates with Warr's description in *The Artist's Body* (2000), where she writes, "...the body is the site through which public and private powers are articulated, it then becomes the site of protest...." (2000, pp.22-23). Warr's approach resonates with my own practice in that it is also a performance of culture, identity, and selfhood. In part, my

investigation attempts to clarify the cultural differences that shape the approach of women artists with similar preoccupations to my own. Such artists are often invested in valuing aspects of tradition in order to subvert conventional understandings, which has led to the development of what this exegesis seeks to argue, in the genre of feminist performance activism.

Questions around cultural appropriation and authenticity are also critical in this context. Feminist scholar Spivak (b. India 1942) activist Mala Sen (b. India 1947-2011) and intercultural scholar Rustom Bharucha (b. India 1953) are important scholars, whose writing on these issues demonstrate evidence in support of my own lines of enquiry. An autoethnographic approach (Ellis, C et al., 2011, p.1) links the threads of the scholarly enquiry. This chapter draws together early and current influences that underpin this enquiry. Intercultural art, which categorizes my work, is also an area of debate. In the discourse of gender preference and the attitudes of female shame in India, I draw on Spivak and Sen, but in order to explain their relevance to the subject at hand, I offer a brief explanation of the injustices that have driven my personal protests, through the medium of performance, on the topics of female infanticide, widow immolation or *sati*, and the consequences of the dowry system.

Another strong motivation for utilising Kali iconography is to reclaim her iconography from Western feminist and New Age representations, many of which are distorted and misinformed acts of cultural appropriation. Though I acknowledge the importance of western feminists, for example theorist and scholar Judith Butler, I have consciously focused on Indian theorists, scholars, and artists, whose investigations into Indian social customs, caste, religion, and political environment are most relevant to the critique and analysis of my practice. In the context of female iconography, cultural stereotypes and subversion of religious or mythical icons in contemporary art, I have referred to women

artists from both east and west. I particularly focus on the devaluation of Indian women, Indian feminism, and the western cultural appropriation of Indian figures such as Kali.

The primary focus of this doctoral study is the presentation of *Urban Kali*, and my performance practice that led me to this scholarly research. As a performer, dance practice has been the predominant genre of art that I have been engaged with, both as classical Indian dancer, and as contemporary experimental, intercultural artist. This doctoral research attempts to enhance and develop my own contemporary voice, grounded in the hybrid experiences of growing up in a multi-religious environment in India. Rather than a detailed expansion of theories on contemporary art, film, western religions, gender debates or western feminism, the research centres on the representation of Kali iconography as a contemporary performance art form. Additionally, the exegesis attempts to clarify how I have sought to redefine the feminine, by drawing on the ambiguous notions of spiritual and mystical agencies prevalent in Indian dance traditions, in order to explore, or subvert Hindu goddess iconography as concepts in my practice. My artistic aesthetic draws on the naïve art of Indian roadside temples, posters and iconography. The concept of "tradition as transgression" discovered in this doctoral research, resonated with the approach that underpinned my decades of intercultural performance.

1.2. Research Questions

These debates about Indian misogyny lead to questions that this research project may pose, which I suggest, may be how and if culture can be performed, and if Kali iconography in contemporary performance may be subverted or transgressed?

Another question that may arise from this research project is whether an Indian born-Australian artist can represent the body as both symbol and text in secular performance, drawing on religious Hindu culture? These questions underpin this research project, which

seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on intercultural approaches to art. By debating theories on intercultural performance practices, I also expand on a contemporary approach to Indian dance and aesthetics, by describing how some choreographers adhere to sacred traditions and ritual, as intrinsic to the art form, while others chose to strip the form of its patriarchal-themed religiosity. In addressing these research questions, I draw on crucial Indian theorists.

For example, Spivak critiques the process of post-colonial studies that has been assimilated, re-inscribed and represented by western academia and feminism. She challenges the position that questions how "other" subjects may be represented and spoken for, in her pivotal essay "Can The Subaltern Speak?" first published in Nelson and Grossberg's *Marxism and the interpretation of Culture* (1988). Continuing this line of thought, Jukka Jouhki's "Orientalism and India" (2006), suggests that there is an anti-Orientalist approach, likening it to a sort of patronizing charity, instigated by "guerilla intellectuals", in an attempt to argue for:

.... the agency of Indian self-representations – on behalf of Indians. What has been common to most approaches on studying India is the fetishisation of otherness, a compulsion to dichotomy between the West and India, whether it be expressed by Westerners or Indians (Jouhki 2006, p.15).

The next section maps my methodology and approach to contemporary, intercultural performance.

1.3. Methodology

By using an autoethnographic approach to this scholarly investigation, I attempt to use the strategies of cultural performance theory as listed by John Lowell Lewis in his 2013 *The Anthropology of Cultural Performance*, in which he suggests that an autoethnographic approach would ideally include the following elements:

(1) a phenomenology—an account of human experience; (2) a semiotic theory—how that experience is mediated by signs; and (3) a theory of culture itself (2013, p.123).

I address these elements in the following section:

Account of human experience: Ethnographic and ethnicity of my performance aesthetics are described in this introduction chapter, which forms the background to this project, namely, early influences and my Indian/Burmese heritage and Kolkata upbringing. The autoethnographic aspects of the methodology used to analyse this project is to demonstrate how my ethnicity and experience of immigration and constant moving between two cultures influenced the evolution of my practice. Raab (2013) is one theorist whose theories, amongst others, I elaborate on in relation to autoethnography.

Semiotic Theory: My practice of performing iconography, as well as drawing on the semiotic nuances of Hindu dance culture, form the basis of this investigation and analysis of my practice. By linking my practice to other artists and theorists with similar concerns, my own idiosyncratic performance language can be described as "mediation by signs", by which I mean that my body, as signifier, is the site of symbol and metaphor. Throughout this exegesis, I frequently link the threads of *tradition as transgression* in my practice in order to argue why Kali iconography, specifically, is relevant as a symbol of protest against female shame and widespread misogyny.

Theory of Culture: This element is covered in my detailed descriptions of my Indian classical dance background as central to my methodology of drawing on tradition in order to subvert cultural stereotype, and the consequence of my hybrid experiences of living between two cultures. Hybrid experiences are described by Lowell Lewis as a necessary factor in "inventing" or performing culture (p.135).

In his chapter "Problems of Performance Auto-Ethnography" Lowell Lewis suggests that

the most compelling insights into autoethnography in relation to cultural performance are by Roy Wagner in his publication *The Invention of Culture*, that "culture is invented or co-created through the clash of human experiences of the strange and the foreign" (2013, p.135), a theory that resonates with my own experience. The clash of cultures described by Lowell Lewis through experiences of being in another world resonate with my own experience of immigration from India to Australia in the early seventies, an event that subsequently impacted on the development of my culturally-hybrid contemporary performance practice. Without the experience of cultural displacement, my present practice and its analysis would not exist. The invention or "performance of culture" is inherent in my practice, and is again, explained succinctly by Lowell Lewis:

In this scenario, both foreign culture and one's own culture are "invented," in a sense, through the same process, but the invention is not a free-form imagination; rather, it is constrained by the harsh realities of other people's actions and beliefs. It follows from this that the more dissonant the encounter, the more strange the clash, the more fruitful and interesting the subsequent account (2013, p.135).

My research also draws on autoethnographic approaches as defined by (Ellis, C et al., 2011, p.1) to reflect and situate my practice with a particular focus on feminine identity in secular art. My approach aligns with those of American author, poet and educator, Diana Raab's "Transpersonal approaches to autoethnographic research and writing" (2013). As Raab argues, researchers who use an autoethnographic approach are necessarily "unique", since their research is driven by the memories of past events that have impacted on their lives, and that the further in the past those lived experiences are, as a source of reference, the stronger the argument or research will be (2013, pp.2-3). According to Raab, this sharing of recollections opens up a dialogue not only between the reader and the autoethnographer, but also triggers a process of self-dialogue and inner perception, suggesting that as an

embodied or transcendent experience, the researcher “becomes their story” (2013, pp.2-3). The response, or empathic aspect of autoethnography is particularly relevant in the area of intercultural performance and links the researcher to similar threads or patterns of experiences within a specific (cultural) group. Raab also cites Chang (2008), Haynes (2011), and Spry (2001) in their argument for the advantages of using autoethnography as a powerful tool for gathering information, which situates the practitioner-researcher as a storyteller. By exploring their own culturally specific narratives, researchers position themselves within a wider context. While Raab is writing in the context of memoir and lifewriting, this exegesis contends that an autoethnographic approach also supports the analysis of my exploration of connecting the performed-cultural body in relation to female identity on the one hand, and the body as metaphor on the other. The reflexive practice (of an autoethnographic approach), of sustaining a continuous dialogue with the self, and the reconstructing and mapping of the experience, brings the reader /audience face to face with the subject (Raab, pp.3-5). These theories of Raab, Spry and Chang are all linked to the self-reflexive praxis of this project.

Another feature of autoethnographic research is described by Dwayne Custer, who likens this research methodology as an artistic tool that "cuts and chisels at the very stone of our inner core" (Custer, 2014, p.5). Additionally, Margaret Cameron (1955-2014), in *I shudder to think: performance as philosophy* (2012), includes many observations regarding the use of personal experience and the self. She describes the methodology of the process:

To leverage space with a question is a way to leverage "dimensionality", the dimensionality of thought, movement and felt-sense, using words as working questions that perform by asking, not answering (Cameron, p.12).

Most relevant to this research project, are Cameron's observations on the "questioning"

and the performance of asking, as being at the core of research driven practice. This approach reflects my own exploration in contemporary performance making, that seeks to challenge tradition, cross boundaries, and explore subjects that may be considered taboo, and in doing so, create more questions in the response from the viewer and the performer. The purpose of art is not to justify or "answer", but through experiment and risk, to explore and challenge what is considered traditional or normal. Citing Louise Bourgeois's description of work as a "rebound" in relation to energy, matter, motion and the relationship between these elements, writes Cameron, "My body receives and rebounds in intimate transactions" (Cameron, p.22). Similarly, motivation, provocation, and improvisation, are actions that are all strategies in the making of the new work, *Urban Kali*, highlighting my use of iconography as performance, where the body, as iconised artifact, becomes "the site of protest", as suggested by British writer Tracy Warr (2000).

The British writer Tracy Warr suggests in *The Artist's Body* (2000) that the artist's body functions as a "resistance to power", that the body is the site for articulating protest and socially aware performance, and as resistance to Modernism's "repressive, exclusionary and colonising logic" (2000, p.21). By using an autoethnographic approach, I position my current practice as part of a lineage that understands the body as a site for socially aware performance, with the specific use of the artist's body as both site and material. The "resistance and repression" of "colonising logic" referenced in Warr's comment does not apply to my practice, which is concerned with specific subjects that deal more with feminist activism, and the repressive effects of female shame that lead to current Indian misogyny. My discussion or description of intercultural art, cultural stereotype and cultural appropriation are drawn from my intentional choice of predominantly non Eurocentric theorists and artists, in order to avoid the "exclusionary and colonising logic" of many Western feminist theorists who played no

part in the evolution of my practice. On the other hand, many performance artists and choreographers, from both Western and Eastern cultures have influenced my contemporary work. The artists who demonstrate precedents of my practice are described in "Chapter Two: The Intercultural Female Body: Major Influences " and "Chapter Four: The Body as Ritual Artifact" in this exegesis.

An autoethnographic approach as methodology in the context of this exegesis also enables the linking of several threads of the scholarly enquiry by employing memory, dialogue, action, emotion, and spirituality, framed by the predominant idea of using "tradition as transgression".

One of the primary methods in putting forward tradition as transgression in the performance of culture using symbols and metaphors is described in Anthony Elliot's *Concepts of the Self* (2007), where he explains the sociological approaches to selfhood, and how society constructs the self, within a constantly shifting social environment (Elliot 2007, p.25). With the advent of mass media in our current culture of rapid social change, impacted by on-going conflict resulting in mass migrations, the "socially constructed self", as a consequence, is also constantly being redefined and transgressed. This evolution of the cultural body is at the core of my own practice-led research (PLR), which has inevitably shifted direction and evolved during the course of my performance practice over two decades. Most importantly, my methodology and approach to creating and performing is rooted in a visual culture, drawn from my background and heritage, described in detail in this chapter.

Though I have drawn on autoethnographic methodology, I have also found Anna Grimshaw's essay, "Art and the Visualization of Anthropology" (2003) relevant to this enquiry. Grimshaw analyses the connection between anthropology and art, describing it as an "anthropological way of seeing", meaning that one does not confine the

observation or representation of an idea merely through the sense of vision, but as a metaphor for knowing, based on knowledge located in the body and the senses, in order to create a “visual texture of memory” (Grimshaw 2003, p.197), that echoes my own methods by drawing on my lived experiences and memories in order to create an artistic aesthetic and "invention" of an idiosyncratic cultural identity. Having aligned my autoethnographic approach to the theorists cited in this introduction, the next section outlines my practical methodology, such as journaling and documentation as process.

1.3.1. Documentation: Film and Video collaborations

Documentation is another form of research, and a crucial tool in demonstrating an argument or addressing a question in practice led research. Art historian Anne Marsh's *performance ritual document* (2014) questions if performance art can successfully be portrayed or represented, through documentation, specifically through the medium of still photography and video/film (Marsh 2014, p.9). Photographic and film/video media has been the most evocative method for presenting my own performance concepts, and entirely separate to the documentation or recording of the work. In collaborating with film and video artists, my initial concepts and aesthetics are reinterpreted, through the artistic lens and individual aesthetic of the photographer/filmmaker, creating another layer to the work. Marsh's chapter titled "document: photograph, relic, media" clarifies the difference between performance art documentation, performative self-portraiture (for example Cindy Sherman's work), and photo -performances, as well as photographs as art objects within a museum or gallery. Marsh refers to old photographic props as "fetishes", and "signature objects" (2014,p.51) which are terms I also strongly identify with, having used photographic documentation as relic and archive, for example in *Mindimi: The Burmese Princess* (1999, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth WA). In this work, images of my mother and maternal grandmothers were projected on screens, my body, and other surfaces to evoke the aesthetics of another era and a

different cultural environment, and to emphasise the role of Burmese women in a mainly patriarchal world.

Marsh's compelling description of Nasim Nasr's (2010) video work *Erasure*, is an example of how female iconography using film or photography as media can drive concepts of intercultural feminist activism. It is a powerful commentary on Iranian women. Based on memories of her youth in Iran, and under the oppressive patriarchal rule of the country, Nasr's performance is driven by the use of the black *chador* (the full semi-circular garment that is used by Muslim women that covers the entire body, and part or all of the face). The *chador* is stretched out in the shape of a large fan, and used as a surface for writing text in chalk. Nasr used the poetry of Iranian feminist poet Forugh Farrokhzad, using both Farsi and English, then erased and crossed through words, till they were indecipherable, leaving a powdery residue, as metaphor for written histories of the feminine that are erased (Marsh 2014, pp.145-148). This work resonates with my own ritualistic use of fabric and colour, in using Kali iconography, or referencing sacred concepts in secular performance. Another critical dimension of my practice is documentation through journaling.

The practice of keeping journals and "dancing on paper" draws on my fifteen-year training in Indian classical dance, which required a keen knowledge of theory, memorised sacred texts and dance theory, all delivered from teacher to student in the oral tradition. This system of documentation and notation of dances ensured a thorough understanding and memorisation of lengthy dance items which were usually divided into separate sections for musical notes, *ragas* (chosen set of notes), dance verses derived from poetry, traditional dance repertoire (usually in Sanskrit or Tamil), dance syllables that a vocalist will use to call out the dance segments called *Nattuvangam*, and finally the actual drum syllables that are in unison with the foot-work. The oral tradition required students to invent their own personal interpretations via diagrams and codes,

using *mudras* (hand gestures) associated with footwork, in a complex, personalized system of notation. In Figs. 4 and 5 (p. 34 and p.35), I demonstrate how my earlier documentation of traditional Indian classical dance theory was later used as a method of dance notation in making new works, planning theatrical strategies, designing costumes and inserting text. Journaling as creative process and documentation is a method I have used to document scripts, choreographic material, and process. It combines the various threads of text, writing, and dance choreography, designing of costumes, sets, and props, storyboarding sequences for film or staging, and dance or movement notation as an integral part of the creative process. In the context of this project, documentation is a crucial element in analysing the new work, *Urban Kali*.

Documentation as process traces and marks the intersection of artistic and creative discoveries, and, through this arts-based inquiry, encourages self-reflexive practices in research, leading to my current enquiry into feminist performance activism. To date, visual documentation remains a primary method of research I have used not only to create art, but also to explore identity, and as a practical means of mapping and experimenting with new concepts. It has been my *modus operandi* for over twenty years⁵. Eugen Bacon's "Journaling—a path to exegesis in creative research" (2014), describes journaling as a process: "[journaling] gives me a portrait by kick-starting the analytical gaze at self and process. The portrait is a reflection of the self and the evolving self, as I invent and re-invent myself" (Bacon 2014, p.6).

Often the painted or drawn documentation of my work becomes a separate artefact, and is often displayed or exhibited in the foyer of the main performance space. Within

⁵ The practice of journaling began at an early age (around the age of eight) when I began to draw visual diaries, "comic book" stories and later began to document and study dance theory through drawings and paintings. My interest in graphic novels and animation inspire many of my choreographic works and visual art practice to date.

the non-linear freedom of the work-book journal, metaphors, fragments of ideas and an unfolding of process through drawing and writing transforms the journal into a transitional object, which then becomes the backbone of the creative work. Below, I list some of the guidelines or subheadings to my process of journaling or using project-work-books:

- Mapping the process
- Collection as process (collecting data, research notes)
- Memory as process (using past projects as a base or source)
- Archival material & notation of choreography
- Storyboarding sequences (for both choreography and film/video)
- Designs of costuming, sets and props
- Scripts or inspirational texts
- Collage: Using photographs and painting/drawing and layering images in order to physically shred, dismantle, and reassemble ideas on paper, including scripts and texts.

The use of video and film as research and integration in live performance is also a method that is characteristic of my work that supports my artistic vision. For example, in 1993, upon my return from an intensive six-month study of Odissi dance in India, I returned to create *Mudrasa* (1993, Artrage Festival, Perth), with my company *Kalika*. Super 8 Film was used to explore the relationship between the body and filmic perspectives of the body in motion. Sequences of dancers using rigorous exercise routines based on Indian martial arts, using saris as "bindings" and tensions were framed by typically Australian landscapes of beaches and graffiti- adorned freeway underpasses. Film was also used for my work *Kali Digambar* (1995) and described in the appendix of performances at the end of this exegesis. Since 1993 I have collaborated with video artists and filmmakers, who have integrated video, photography,

and film into my dance performances. These collaborations using video or film have been instrumental in presenting my specific performance aesthetics, and the themes that I have tried to animate through dance, in order to expand the borders between installation, ritual, and dance, and to extend the transient nature of live performance. In all of these collaborations I have retained my own performance aesthetics, specifically when Indian or Hindu dance culture is the focus. In these situations, I create my own story-boards for film or video sequences, write my own scripts, and stage and direct the choreography of the film. Film and video media in my work has facilitated my examination of the many layers of performance. In my performance experience, film/video, photography, including the use of sound scores, musical compositions and collaboration with other visual artists, function as a conduit between the complex and intricate routes between culture, history, and memory. In a performance, it also acts as a tool that navigates the audience through the artistic terrain created by the performer, a feature of the new work, *Urban Kali*.

As research methodology, film/video and photographic elements have all contributed to the making of the new work, *Urban Kali*. Throughout the process, and in the context of this research project, it is connected to the core of the work, and its main motif of Kali iconography as performance. Other methods used in my performance practice include the use of ritual. Marsh observes that even though ritual and its associations were criticized in post modernism, practitioners continued to embrace process that explored the connection between art and anthropology, which resulted in the re-evaluation of ritual in contemporary art (2014, p.116). Ritual as methodology and function, in relation to this research project, is drawn from sacred Indian dance ritual, which, when transformed into a secular practice, can function as a specific comment or protest. In the context of my work, I describe ritual as a series of stylised "actions", together with materiality, by which I mean the use of textures, fabrics, colours and symbols, as

methods that define my work. Ritual as methodology is expanded upon in Chapter Four's "The Body as Ritual Artifact", that compares the work of past and contemporary artists in order to analyse and critique my own approach and methods in creating performance.

I have always identified my arts practice as grounded in a distinctly visual culture that has integrated a formally trained visual arts practice with a rigorous classical dance training, the latter of which involved a mainly oral tradition. The next section, which describes my early influences, offers a background to the strong influences that are at the core of my artistic practice. In order to understand how or what I have "transgressed" from, it is important to explain the complex characteristics of Indian classical dance and my own Indian/Burmese heritage as the origin of my contemporary work, as influences that have shaped my current practice.

1.4. Early Influences

The next section offers an insight into the early influences of my childhood growing up in Kolkata, India, and my training in Indian classical dance forms that constitute the foundation of my performance practice to date. My Kolkata childhood, Burmese-Indian heritage, and the lasting impact of growing up in a multi-religious society continue to exert a strong impact on both my artistic and personal life. My life in Kolkata until the age of eighteen, when I emigrated with my parents to Australia, made a lasting impression, one that I attribute to a strong connection with India that has never been severed due to my frequent return for periods of study in Indian classical dance and artist residencies. My love of the arts, particularly visual art and dance performance - was cultivated by the rich palette of religious and social diversity inherent in my formative years in this unique city, which is regarded as the centre of Indian culture. It is the birthplace of India's most famous philosophers, poets, artists and spiritual masters including the great Kali devotee-saint

Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836 –1886), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a disciple of Ramakrishna, the great Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952) author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*, the recently canonized Mother Teresa (1910-1977), the Nobel Prize in Literature winner and Poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1901) and the revolutionary artist and filmmaker Satyajit Ray (1921-1992). I mention these great Bengalis because they were influential in my childhood and early adulthood during and after my life in India. For example the works of Tagore were part of my education, when I studied his short stories in Bengali and English, while Satyajit Ray's movies are legendary for bringing these stories to life by introducing a whole new genre of "arthouse" Indian cinema. Like the works of Tagore, whose stories Ray brought to life in his films, his movies cast women and social conditions in India in a compelling new light. Unlike the surreal escapism of the Bollywood film industry, Ray's films focused on Bengal and Bengalis, the plight of poverty stricken people, the caste system, and controversial relationships between men and women during British colonial India. The strength and bravery of his female heroines who challenged the overwhelming restrictions imposed by both British values and Hindu patriarchy are recurring themes in his work, which is described in detail in Andrew Robinson's *Satyajit Ray The Inner Eye* (1989). Ray's aesthetics in depicting colonial and post-colonial Bengali characters are exemplary representations of intercultural art. Ray wrote in 1982, "What is attempted in most films of mine, is, of course, a synthesis, but it can be seen as such only by someone who has his feet in both cultures" (Robinson 1989, p.325).

1.4.1 Kolkata Childhood

My generation of post-Indian Independence youth embraced Indian culture that included the movies of Ray, the classical Indian music of Ravi Shankar and the growing interest in Indian classical arts and tradition, while simultaneously being influenced by fashion and music by our western counterparts who were experiencing the sexual and spiritual freedom of the seventies. Indian spirituality drew many people from all over the

world, including the Beatles, influencing young Indians like myself to appreciate the country through a different lens, and inspiring us to undertake pilgrimages and travel to locations unfrequented by tourists. Consequently during my adolescence, in my circle of friends, I experienced the spiritual fervor and passion for a flourishing arts scene, as well as robust debates about art, music, society and politics.

Equally important was my upbringing within a multi-religious-caste-conscious cultural environment that included Christian, Muslim, and Zoroastrian (Pharsee) religions. The predominant Bengali Hindu culture, though different to my Indian/Burmese heritage, co-existed within a hybridity of cultures and beliefs. For example within my own family, my father was Catholic, my mother was Buddhist, and my uncle a Brahmin Hindu, thus exposing me to a hybridity of religious customs from an early age. Christmas, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim religious holy days were all acknowledged and celebrated in some form. Above all, Bengal's Goddess Kali remains a prominent female icon for this city. Kali is the only Hindu goddess to rule over other gods or goddesses in Bengal.



Fig.1. Rakini Devi aged 18, Kolkata, personal archive.

During the British colonial period, Kolkata, named Calcutta, an English derivative of the Bengali *Kalikot*, or *Kalikshetra*, (the place of Kali) was the capital of India until independence in 1947.

Throughout my childhood (until the age of eighteen when I immigrated to Australia) and on subsequent visits since then, I have witnessed Kali *puja* (festivals). Kali *puja* follows *Diwali*, the festival of lights, which occur usually in the months of October or November, depending on Hindu calendars. My childhood memories of Kolkata are still resonant with the intoxicating sights and aromas of these Hindu Goddess festivals, especially the ten days of the goddess, celebrated as *Durga Puja*,⁶ commemorating the annual visit of the Goddess Durga to earth, departing after ten days to the realm of the gods. *Durga Puja* is one of the largest most elaborately held Hindu festivals throughout India. The vibrant roadside shrines or *pandals* (temporary roadside temples) housing the pantheon of multiple goddesses, spring up every year throughout India, with pilgrims flocking to the spectacles in all the main cities. Simultaneously, every city suburb and village compete in the creation of these *pandals*, which vary in size and splendor. Fig. 2. Is a detail of an elaborately crowned Kali enshrined in a *pandal*, Kolkata.

As a child, icons of the Virgin Mary pervaded the convent I studied in. The serenity and beauty of the Madonna in our convent chapel was in total contrast to the pantheon of gods and goddesses I witnessed at Hindu festivals, though the worship and ritual of both religions appealed to my indiscriminating childish eyes. I anticipated the annual depictions of these Hindu festivals, visiting numerous awe-inspiring tableaux of the richly adorned Goddess *Durga*, flanked by *Laxmi*, goddess of wealth, and *Saraswati*,

⁶ The Goddess Durga's departure, along with other important gods and goddesses, is celebrated by elaborate rituals of immersion of the richly adorned *murtis*, the Sanskrit word for sacred idols of gods and goddesses, into the river Ganges. *Kali Puja*, however, is celebrated as a separate event.

goddess of learning. Shrouded in the heady smoke of incense, these dioramas were an intoxicating synthesis of a visual and sensory spectacle. The ringing of temple bells, the blowing of conch shells, and the chanting of priests merge with blaring Bollywood music from loudspeakers to create a stirring cacophony of sounds. The scent of jasmine flowers worn in women's hair, the flashing of women's jewelry adorning bright saris, and the spicy aroma of delicious street food contribute to an electric energy that lingers over the city. The highly charged visual and spiritual aesthetic of these Kolkata *pandals* are the primary source of inspiration for my current live art installations, employing cloth canopies and mosquito nets to represent my own interpretation of *pandals*.



Fig. 2. Kali Puja, Kolkata, (<http://simlapal-jarisha.blogspot.com/2010/11/kali-puja-2010.html>)

The theme of religious shrines frequently appears in my work in different incarnations and sites. It is the naïve, gaudy depictions of ritual goddess worship found in villages and remote locations that inspire the current aesthetics in my performance installations, for example *Kali Madonna* (2014) and *The Female Pope* (2013--). *Kali Madonna* is a synthesis of the Mexican Catholic Madonna and Goddess Kali, inspired by my 2014 visit to Mexico City, where I observed the similarities of Mexican Catholic religious

spectacles, that included processions and vivid depictions of the Madonna, Christ, and other saints. These performance personae will be discussed later in the exegesis.

From 1972 to 1976, I remained in Kolkata to study Indian Classical Dance, at the *Amala Shankar Dance Academy*, where it was compulsory to study three forms of classical dance,

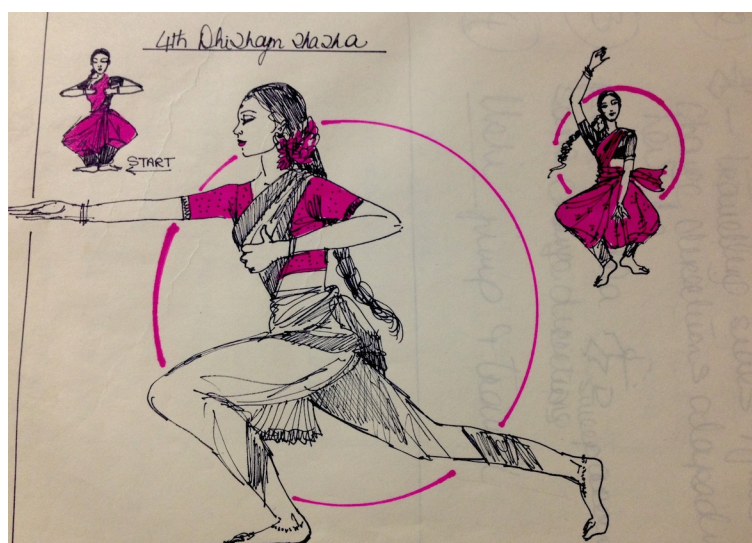


Fig. 3. Rakini Devi Dance notation, 1980 Journal.

with a choice of one style to specialise in. The forms were Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Kathakali. Though I chose Kathak, on my return to Australia I began my studies afresh in Bharatanatyam. The next section describes my training in these forms, and traces my "transformation" from Indian classical dancer to the present in chronological order. It outlines Indian dance terminology and influences relevant to the theme of this exegesis, namely, of subverting sacred Indian (temple) dance tradition and culture to a secular movement vocabulary and performance aesthetic. All these experiences have undoubtedly influenced my current practice using hybrid iconography as a performance aesthetic. They are a distillation of embodied knowledge in classical dance, and

expression or extension of sacred or religious traditions, including Hindu, Burmese Buddhism (Mahayana), Tibetan Buddhism, and Catholic female iconography.

1.4.2. Indian Temple dance Traditions: Bharatanatyam and Odissi

The classical Indian dance forms I work with are Bharatanatyam and Odissi, both of which are incorporated into my contemporary choreographic practice. This section provides some background into these classical forms. My training involved the traditional oral style, which required the memorizing and noting of all the information imparted by teachers, including documenting theory, notation of complex dance rhythms, Sanskrit verses and intricate *mudras* (hand gestures) in written form. This theoretical study and the documentation and notation of dance repertoire contributed to my practice of journaling as process, including drawing, writing, and mapping choreography. Drawing on my own notes and studies, unless otherwise cited, the following descriptions and explanations are my own.

There are seven main classical Indian dance styles developed from temple dance traditions. Each style is distinguished by its historical and geographical characteristics: Bharatanatyam (South India), Odissi (State of Odisha), Kathak (Northern India), Kathakali (State of Kerala), Manipuri (State of Assam), Kuchipudi (South India) and Mohini Attam (South India). The differences between the two styles that I work with, Bharatanatyam and Odissi, are an important factor in creating a cross-cultural dance vocabulary, and remain the basis for my current performance aesthetic. The word Bharatanatyam combines *bhavam* meaning expression, *ragam* meaning music, *thalam* meaning rhythm and *natyam* meaning dance. In Leela Samson's *Rhythm in Joy* (1987), she explains that Bharatanatyam is derived from a treatise called the *Natyashastras*, which is historically dated around the second century AD, and handed down through

the years as an oral tradition. She also describes its origins being sourced from early indigenous South Indian dance traditions, and, similar to other temple dance forms, it is influenced by ancient architecture, Hindu mythology, Sanskrit texts, and the Tamil classics.

Bharatanatyam is said to be a fine example of Aryan and Dravidian cultures, preserved and situated far from the turmoils of war and invasions that beset the north of India (Samson 1987, pp.17-25). Characteristically, Bharatanatyam is a solo dance form in which the dancer is the only storyteller, and enacts all the characters of different genders and age through the complex synthesis of three main aspects:

Nritta: "Pure dance", meaning dance technique that does not involve sacred gesture, or stylized emotions, and devoid of sacred-themed dance repertoire. This aspect became the groundwork for my exploration in cross-cultural dance. The term "pure dance" is also related to items in an Indian classical dance recital repertoire that showcased "pure" technique, virtuosity, and demonstrated the dancer's skill and understanding of the complexities inherent in Indian classical rhythmic dance patterns. These are separate to items that incorporate expressive dance, narrative dance, or ritualistic, invocatory dances. In my current practice, I often apply the term "pure dance" to my contemporary choreography to distinguish some works that may incorporate spoken word, to those that may be abstract, movement-based dance.

Nritya: Is dance that incorporates movement and expression. Characteristic of dance repertoire is the use of repetitious sentences called *sahityam* (a sentence in dance, usually translated from Sanskrit and classical Tamil texts). It has emotions, expressions and has a meaning demonstrated through a stylized and complex gestural vocabulary shown by the *hastas* (hand gestures).

Natya: is when a person is portraying a character, typically in a dance drama, which will

often include a troupe or ensemble. My own training was focused on the solo dance form, and did not include performing in large ensembles or dance dramas.

The training in these techniques added to my flair for storytelling, allowing me to embellish and narrate in a stylised form rather than a "naturalistic" method. I have also used this stylised form of narrative dance, to perform my own text and scripts for performance, integrating my own scripts and "subverted" gestural vocabulary.



Fig. 4. Rakini Devi Dance notation, Double hand gestures, 1980 Journal.

When teaching dance to western dance students, I created a vocabulary that does not use sacred repertoire or religious themes, out of respect for its origin as a temple dance form. Alternatively, I still use Indian classical dance rhythmic patterns in contemporary dance choreography. Samson describes Odissi as a form that adheres to the same codes in the Indian classical dance vocabulary, but is different in its aesthetic, and unique in many aspects from the other six classical dance styles in India. Unlike the angular and precise shapes of Bharatanatyam, Odissi's circular "three-bend" poses mirror the voluptuous sensuality of temple sculpture, with curved, rolling spiral movements. She also describes Odissi as having the distinct ability to "reconcile the two aspects of the *Geeta-Govinda*: the erotic and the devotional" (Samson 1987, p.111). The *Geeta Govinda* is a collection of devotional poetry written by the 12th

century poet Jayadeva. The sensual and often erotic verses depict the love of Krishna and his consort, Radha, and are also the main source of dance repertoire in Odissi. The passionate love between the god Krishna and the human Radha is a metaphor for the yearning of the human soul to unite with the divine. Bharatanatyam's wider, more technically complex repertoire is based on sacred texts and Tamil poetry, and celebrates the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses in Hindu mythology. Radha is a metaphor for the yearning of the human soul to unite with the divine. Bharatanatyam's wider, more technically complex repertoire is based on sacred texts and Tamil poetry, and celebrates the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses in Hindu mythology.

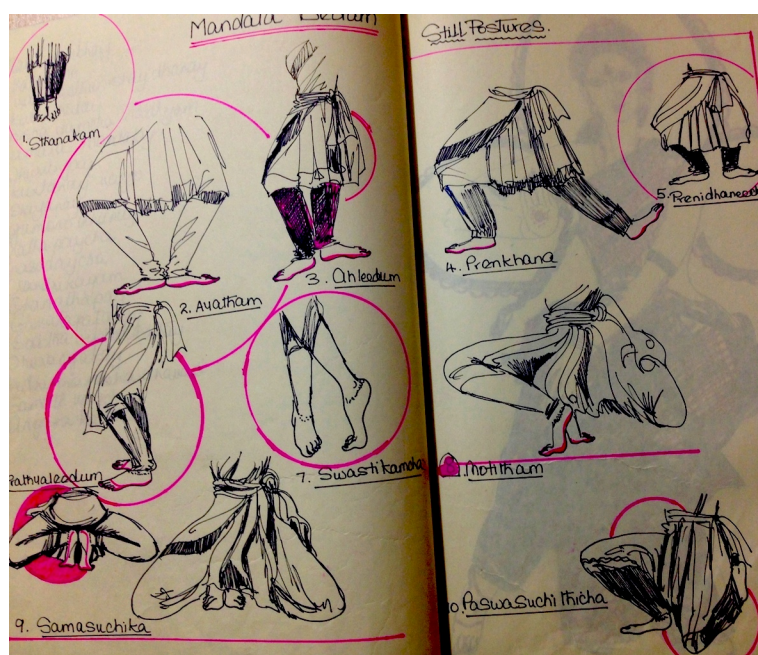


Fig.5. Rakini Devi Dance Notation: Bharatanatyam feet positions, 1980 Journal.

Radha is a metaphor for the yearning of the human soul to unite with the divine. Bharatanatyam's wider, more technically complex repertoire is based on sacred texts and Tamil poetry, and celebrates the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses in Hindu mythology.



Fig.6. Rakini Devi *Arangetram*, (Bharatanatyam Debut) 1989, Octagon Theatre, Perth, WA. Photographer Jim Hooper.

Chapter One has outlined the background, research questions, methodology and early influences leading to the new work, *Urban Kali*. The next chapter focuses on key elements that underpin the enquiry of this thesis, and serves as an additional background to the research and practice that informed my body of work, both past and present. The main thrust of the argument, which is "tradition as transgression", is relevant to the Indian artists and scholars discussed, who were revolutionary in subverting stereotypical female roles, through performance and literary activism.

Chapter Two: The Intercultural Female Body: Major Influences

Introduction

Following the description of my Indian classical dance training in the previous chapter, this chapter discusses key women who subverted male-driven Indian dance tradition. In addition to my Indian upbringing in Kolkata and training in Bharatanatyam and Odissi, this next section firstly introduces one of the most important female influences in my life, and as a consequence, my artistic practice, which is that of my Burmese mother, Daw Khin May Gyi, born in Rangoon, India, 1918, and who passed away in 2005, in Perth, Western Australia. As an example of autoethnographic performance, I describe *Mindimi* (1999), a work dedicated to her and my Burmese matriarchal family. My family influences led me to the Indian feminists, theorists and activists, Rukmini Devi, Sanjukta Panigrahi and Chandralekha, whose pioneering or revolutionary dance practices made significant long reaching changes in art and society.

2.1. *Mindimi: the Burmese Princess* (1999): Autoethnographic performance

My mother's Buddhist Burmese belief, wisdom and compassion have been a strong influence throughout my life. Her culinary expertise was especially renowned. I was her avid pupil as I watched her prepare our daily meals or lavish family feasts, all the while being regaled by her stories of her life in Burma, Burmese mythology and macabre fairy tales, along with her "domestic" instructions that centred on recipes, traditions of hospitality and "women's issues". Many of her stories have since found their way into my performance scripts, and in particular in *Mindimi: the Burmese Princess* (PICA, 1999), my first full-length, solo dance theatre work, written and choreographed by me and directed by Sally Richardson. The work was created in homage to my Burmese matriarchal family.

Fragments of these stories have appeared in one form or another in my performance practice as both text and gesture. For example, the sensual tactile experience of eating with one's fingers, the rituals and protocols of preparing and serving food, drawn from everyday observations of my mother and relatives, gave me an appreciation of the everyday physicality of Indian/Burmese culture. These observations of everyday life were incorporated into a stylised gestural dance language that may be understood as characteristic of my choreographic work; a coming together of classical *mudras* (Indian classical hand gestures), and my own idiosyncratic dance vocabulary. My dance vocabulary is similarly influenced by my observations of the gait of Indian women, particularly as they cover their heads while they walk, and further, noting the dexterity of their fingers as they pleat, stretch, drape and arrange their saris with impeccable skill and grace. *Mindimi* is also indicative of the ways in which my work has changed direction over the past two decades. Earlier works from the nineteen nineties for instance, were inspired by Hindu mythology and sought to explore an intercultural dance vocabulary, allowing me to practice the traditional - Indian classical dance within a contemporary performance context thereby "transgressing" or subverting tradition. A two-year Australia Council Dance Fellowship (2001-2002) enabled me time and space to explore a new direction, repositioning my focus towards a broader understanding of feminist, secular subjects as well as exploring Western dance and movement forms.

Critically, however, the development of *Mindimi*, began my exploration in what might be termed "autoethnographic performance" as a means of exploring not only culture and identity, but a personal narrative. *Mindimi* is an early example of my dance exploring how tradition, in the form of sacred goddess iconography and Indian classical dance structures, can be repositioned by combining them into secular stories of my Burmese mother and grandmothers.

Australian, Performance Studies Scholar, Helena Grehan writes of this work, that I act "as a radical ethnographer who becomes the chronicler of third time-spaces by involving [herself] in making culture, both by producing ethnographic texts and by engaging in political activism"(Grehan 2003, p.232). In the same essay, "Rakini Devi: Diasporic Subject and Agent Provocateur" (2003), Grehan, in writing about three of my key works: *The Virtual Goddess* (1997) *Mindimi* (1999) and *Interview with The Virtual Goddess* (2001), points out that:

Through her work Devi encourages us to remember that diaspora is more than a theoretical trope, that it is a complex and often contradictory experience which results in joy as well as pain as it is played out on live bodies...Through this performance we see the potential for reinvesting diaspora with meaning, as Devi corporeally inscribes a complex plural identity within the performance space, requiring an equally complex response from the spectator. We are implicated in the performance process and encouraged to think beyond stereotype (2003, p.229).

Grehan has aptly described the self-created terrain of my performance practice, which plays between the tensions of sacred and secular, past and present, east and west. Within this "space-in-time", I have sought to deconstruct and reconstruct traditional Hindu goddess iconography and classical Indian dance techniques, used satire as performance methodology, and avoided linear narrative, preferring to choreograph a form of montage, to create what I hope is a rich performative experience from fragments of memory, gestures, movement, family photographs and stories as they were told to me by my mother, which formed the foundation of my script.

Mindimi was made up of four main sequences of dance and spoken word, each dedicated to the story of each of my Burmese matriarchs, beginning with my Great-grandmother, my grandmother, my mother, and myself. Each segment unfolded in a different style based on Indian classical dramatic structures. The first story was of my great-grandmother's ordeal as a young fifteen-year old daughter of a fierce Shan chieftain. In order to create a peace treaty to curb my great grandfather's warring and marauding activities, which were a problem for British colonial Burma, a marriage was arranged to a Scottish official. In exchange for the hand of his daughter, my great grandfather also negotiated land and a title, which were bestowed upon him by the British, in an effort to confine his "activities". My great grandmother, horrified at the impending marriage to a "barbarian" as my Burmese family described the thirty-five year old Scottish Mr. Finlay, fled the home twice, only to be hunted down on horseback with her father wielding a whip, in hot pursuit. The "barbarian" proved to be a much-loved fatherly figure, who spoke fluent Burmese, and adopted the male inclinations of his chosen country by keeping many mistresses. His union with my great-grandmother produced only one daughter, my grandmother, who was the subject of the second sequence. The first sequence began with a large gauze screen that separated the audience from the stage, to give the semblance of looking through a mosquito net, or the segregation of women, as was the custom in my mother's family. Dance and spoken word was used in the unfolding of the story.

The second story revolved around my grandmother, wife of a high court judge, whose jealousy against one of my grandfather's many mistresses led her to a spectacular act of arson. On the information provided by her spies, about an impending dalliance with one of his mistresses in a certain village, my grandmother travelled through dense jungle to confront him, armed with a small pistol. Alerted of her arrival by neighbours, my grandfather fled on horseback, having narrowly missed my grandmother's attempts

to shoot him. My grandmother related that, having felt "with her own hands" the warmth of the hastily abandoned lovers' bed, her rage led her to set fire to the mistress's home (and as a result several wooden homes in the village), for which she had to appear in court, accused of arson. Following the strategy of her wily Armenian defence lawyer, my grandmother was presented in court, attired in a traditional Mindimi (princess) costume, chaperoned by a maid, to face these charges. Her petite four-foot frame, adorned with the epitome of Burmese gentility and frailty, created a sensation in court. The judge, upon casting his eyes on the unlikely perpetrator, promptly dismissed the case. My grandfather found the incident amusing, and did not mend his flamboyant womanising. This story was performed as a spoken word segment accompanied by Indian classical dance gestures and exaggerated stylised dramatics, characteristically used when introducing or narrating a story for dance. The central piece of the work was the sequence depicting my mother's harrowing trek from Burma to India during World War 2, which was performed as a dance movement piece overlaid by a voice-over recording of my mother speaking in Burmese to tell her story. The spoken word track was woven into a haunting sound score, specifically commissioned from composer and sound artist, Cat Hope, with whom I have had a twenty-three year collaborative history, and who was influential in my experimental dance explorations through our many projects, beginning with *Suttee* (1992).

The text accompanying this section, *Mindimi Trek*, was scattered throughout the sound score with pauses and punctuations lending the choreography rhythm and resonance. It is also an example of how I structured choreography using spoken (recorded) words as a textual-rhythmic sound score, rather than a literal "enacting" of the narrative. Hope's sound score specifically for this section titled *Mindimi Trek* won her a music award, and my fifteen-minute dance segment was performed at various festivals as an independent solo work under this title.



Fig.7. My mother Daw Khin May Gyi (left) and grandmother Amay (right), Burma, date unknown.

Mindimi Trek (the story of my mother's six-month trek from Burma to India in WW2) toured to Tokyo, Toronto and New York, and was last performed in Melbourne at *Dancehouse* in 2007. It is the only segment that stands alone as the strongest part of the entire work, due to the development of the dance vocabulary and physicality that in my experience successfully integrated "abstract" movement with my own idiosyncratic dance vocabulary. I include the script as an example of autoethnographic performance and my integration of text and movement.

*At 23, my mother walked from Burma to India trekking for six months
 She was fleeing the Japanese with her husband of two months
 Six hundred children were sent ahead of parents to safety
 Only six survived
 People would awake in the morning to find their loved ones dead
 Three months into the journey, my mother became a widow
 She paid a boatman who slipped her husband into the river in a makeshift shroud*

*No one would bury the diseased
The murdering monsoons rained death
My aunt-to-be was the eldest sister bringing her two young siblings to India
They did not survive the three months
My aunt and mother met and journeyed together
Sisters for life
My mother gave up all her possessions for food
When she became my mother
Food was never tastier when prepared by her
Every meal a feast of love
My mother originally set off with 20 garments in a bundle, including her beautiful
Mindimi¹ costume
Along the way she had to discard everything one by one
She also had to shave off her knee length hair
Which became matted and infested
When she came to be my mother
I played in the long black curtain of her hair
Which reached the ground as she sat and combed it dry
I grew up in all my mother's curves.*

Devi R, 1998.

The final segment began with my changing fully onstage into a Classical Indian costume to perform a traditional invocatory dance dedicated to the Goddess Durga. Finally, a projection of my three Burmese mothers appeared on a projection behind me, as a final homage. It was a satisfying and emotional opening night, with my mother (as guest of honour) and sisters in attendance. The work was also an acknowledgement of

my mother's many journeys not only during the war, but her consequent displacement in India and later Australia, where her journey finally ended.

Grehan's essay "Rakini Devi: Diasporic Subject and Agent Provocateur" (2003) captures the essence of the work, which, by contemporary theatre values was by no means without its flaws, but it retained my voice and the integrity of the stories without sentimentality or nostalgia. She writes:

She clearly sees her role as explorer of memory and at the same time as a performer who has the power to raise political issues by weaving stories and evocative movement sequences together into layered performances, which move out from the personal to critique ideas of identity, belonging, oppression and power (Grehan 2003, p. 237).



Fig 8. Projections of my mother (L) and grandmother (R), *Mindimi* 1999, PICA, Photography Frances Andrijich.

Mindimi exemplifies my performance of culture as flexible, fractured, fragmented, and constructed. My mother's stories, experiences and constant guidance throughout my life inevitably influenced my interest and attitudes towards women. Her patriarchal upbringing in a tradition that accepted women as inferior in many ways contradicted her own formidable status as the matriarch in our family, ruling with a gentle but firm hand. From a young age I questioned the imbalance of attitudes towards males and females,

an interest that over the years found a voice in my art and performance practice. Strong female role models beginning with my mother, led to inspiration from a few great pioneers and revolutionary Indian women in dance, who I introduce in the next section.

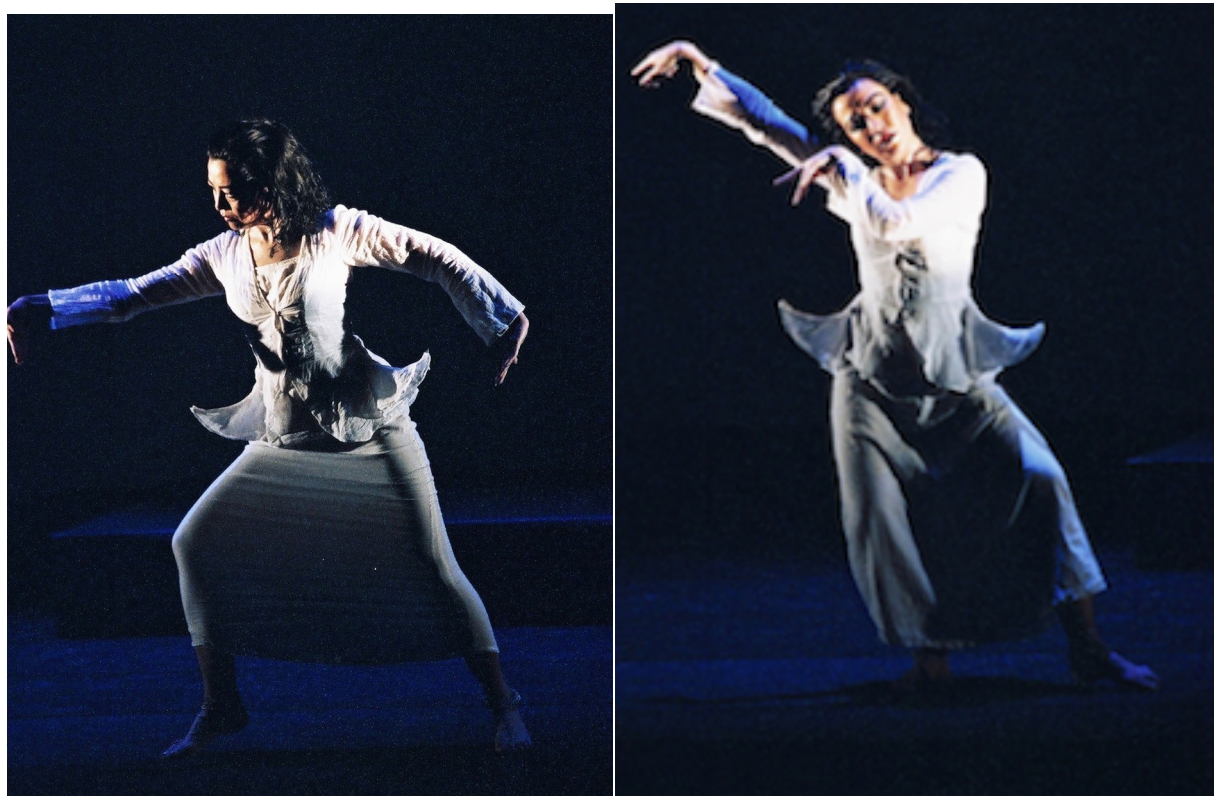


Fig. 9 and 10. Rakini Devi, *Mindimi Trek*, Jade Festival Tokyo, 2002, Photographer unknown.

2.2. Revolutionary Women in Indian classical Dance

The impact of British colonialism in India was not only restricted to the intervention of Hindu social and cultural traditions, but also of Indian culture, including temple dance traditions. Indian historian and professor Daves Soneji traces the laws imposed on the *devadasi* (temple dance tradition) as far back as 1727. In *Unfinished Gestures* (2011), he notes that the removal of *devadasis* from their original tradition of temple dancers to that of *nautch* or court dances in venues like private residences and salons, impacted on their tradition, and as a consequence, many were eventually reduced to roles of

courtesans and prostitutes (Soneji 2011, p.75)⁷. The manipulation of the female role within the arts created the colonial-construct of "native" Indian women's sexuality and proved to be extremely lucrative on both political and economic fronts. Soneji quotes Anupama Taranath (p.75):

Metaphorizing Indian, and by extension all racialized sexuality, into the figure of a woman...was one colonial strategy to encourage comprehension of the unfamiliar, and on a more general level, to partake in various excesses, sexual and otherwise, that India seemed to offer (Taranath 2000, p.15).

Not only the British, however, contributed to the demeaning of women's roles. Within Indian society more broadly, the domestication and subjugation of the feminine role as designated by a predominantly Indian patriarchal society was a significant contributing factor, and is one which this creative research seeks to critique. The domestication of Goddesses stems from what Soneji describes as "the forces of indigenous patriarchy, colonialism and nationalism", which he goes on to suggest are engaged in an ongoing debate between tradition and modernity (Soneji 2012, p.13). This conflict also led to the repertoire and performances of Indian classical and temple dance traditions being censored and shaped to adhere to colonialism, and the values of the middle and upper classes. These conflicting debates between tradition and nationalism impacted on modern day Bharatanatyam in which I am trained. Soneji suggests that colonial attitudes still prevail, describing the performance of Indian classical dance as

⁷ In Jogan Shankar's (1990) *Devadasi Cult: A Sociological Analysis*, he writes how the first anti-nautch (dance) and anti-dedication movement was launched in 1882. During the British rule in India, laws were imposed against the *Devadasi* or temple dance tradition, including all rituals and ceremonies, and the dedication of young women to Hindu shrines (p 87). In Saskia Kersenboom-Story's 1987 *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India*, she describes the rituals, cultural history, and oral traditions of the *devadasis* during the medieval period of Hinduism. The Sanskrit term *Nityasumangali* translates to "the ever-auspicious female" (p 7-11). She explains,

"The *devadasi* is very much a *signifier* expressing a *signified* in the form of her art and role in society [...] signifying the mythical-aesthetic-cum-ritual object residing in the collective consciousness of Hindu tradition (Kersenboom-Story, S p. xvi).

representative of "transnational middle-class morality and cultural economy", and that it stands as a [dance] form that reinforces the "bourgeois constructions of art that are clearly rooted in an ethos of orthodox, domestic roles for women" (2011, p.223).

From within this colonial environment, high caste Hindu Brahmin Rukmini Devi met Anna Pavlova in 1928, a meeting that would forever change Indian Classical dance, as we know it today. Encouraged by Pavlova, she dedicated the rest of her life to the revival of the classical Indian dance traditions. *Kalakshetra* dance academy, founded by her, continues its reputation of high standards in Bharatanatyam, based on Rukmini Devi's own repertoire of musical and dance compositions. My own Bharatanatyam teacher Jayalaxmi Raman, a student of Rukmini Devi, is one of many dancers who continue her legacy.

2.2.1. Rukmini Devi (1904-1986)

Rukmini Devi was one of the first women who, as founder of the legendary *Kalakshetra* Dance Academy, Chennai, elevated the form of *sadir*, or Indian classical dance as it was known then, from the *devadasi* (temple dancer) tradition by removing the erotic or court elements to a more purist style, reviving the complexities of Bharatanatyam to the style it practices today. (Samson 1987,p.97). During British Colonial India, from 1882, the *devadasi* tradition was banned, along with many of its sacred rituals, forbidding women from "decent" homes to study or perform it. Consequently, many of the teachers, who were mainly male, were forced to go underground, till Rukmini Devi revived the form in the mid-nineteen twenties, during British rule in India. Additionally, post-Indian independence in 1947, women, with the support of male teachers and dancers, historically challenged the predominantly patriarchal and nationalistic "ownership" of Indian classical dance in a climate of rising nationalist sentiments that

created further restrictions upon the arts, and women in particular. Rukmini Devi⁸ was also an activist in the rights of children and prevention of cruelty to animals. Samson's biography *Rukmini Devi, a Life* (2010), traces her life from her childhood to her involvement with the Theosophical Society, beginning with her controversial marriage at age sixteen to the Theosophist Society's principal, forty-one year old George Arundale in 1920 (Samson 2010, p.49). Rukmini Devi was a Brahmin Hindu, which, along with her national pride, she remained faithful to. Her development and reformation of Indian dance began to take shape, a move that was afforded to her through the privilege of her high Brahmin caste and the mentorship of



Fig. 11. Rukmini Devi, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rukmini_Devi_Arundale)

Annie Besant, the president of the Theosophical Society. Many of her innovations included expanding the teaching of the usually male dominated roles to women (2010, p. 106). Rukmini Devi's revival of Bharatanatyam addressed every aspect of dance repertoire, music composition, costuming, and staging. Her compositions, reformations,

⁸ Though it is usual to use only the surname when frequently referencing a person, the name "Devi" is an honorific surname used by many dancers and artists instead of their family or married surnames. In my own case, I changed my surname to Devi by deed poll, relinquishing my family name. I use Rukmini Devi's full name when referencing her because even though she was also addressed by her married name as Rukmini Devi Arundale, she is known and referenced mostly and respectfully, as Rukmini Devi.

and repertoire are part of the heritage of Kalakshetra Dance Academy today.

After Indian Independence in 1947, the performing arts were influenced by Indian nationalism⁹, and revived by predominantly male gurus (teachers), in spite of the fact that these dance forms are derived from the *mahari* tradition of women temple dancers. Male gurus were the founders and the guardians of the form, for example the legendary guru Kelucharan Mohapatra (b. 1926-2004) who left a lasting legacy of the Odissi dance form that is practiced today. I was fortunate to be Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's student in 1993, and through him, met one of his greatest female disciples, the late Odissi dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi (b. 1944-1997).

2.2.2. Sanjukta Panigrahi (1944-1997)

Sanjukta Panigrahi was one of the first Odissi exponents who changed the "ideal" Odissi female dance heroine from that of the patriarchy-prescribed maternal, sensual or coquettish consorts depicted in most Odissi repertoire. Through her performance repertoire of rigorous and dynamic repertoire of the goddesses Kali and Durga, accompanied by her equally famous composer and classical vocalist husband, Pandit Raghunath Panigrahi, she exuded *Shakti* or female energy. Aastha Gandhi's article "Who Frames the Dance? Writing and Performing the Trinity of Odissi", (2009) describes how Sanjukta used the technical dance vocabulary of Odissi as a foundation for her experimental research, through her dance demonstrations at ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology, Holstebro, Denmark), for theoretical research. Gandhi writes, "Her research involved working through the Odissi body in the absence of a narrative, through improvisations, and by collaborating with other bodies trained in diverse techniques. Her body was placed in such experimental sites, which no other Odissi body had ventured into, till then" (Gandhi 2009, p.7). Her legacy to Odissi dance

⁹ These topics are discussed again, later in the exegesis, when describing dancer and activist Chandralekha's work.

is one that continues to flourish through her students, inspiring and empowering female dance repertoire.



Fig.12. Sanjukta Panigrahi (<http://sabyasachipictures.blogspot.com.au/>)

2.2.3. Chandralekha (1928-2006)

Another woman who subverted the mainly patriarchal control of Indian classical dance was Chandralekha, whose work and methods I expand upon in Chapter Four's "Chandralekha: Reclaiming *Shakti* and Performing female identity: Chandralekha and Pina Bausch". While Sanjukta elevated the female concept of *Shakti* (female energy) within the dance forms of Odissi, Chandralekha used the structures and grammar of Bharatanatyam to explore, challenge and transgress the attitudes and traditions of the form, by focusing on the female form, female sexuality, and by divesting her dance repertoire from religious or sacred themes. She also challenged the patriarchal standards of female beauty that extended to traditions of costuming and make up, preferring to present her dancers in simple cotton saris, devoid of makeup or jewelry.

Her reinvention of the image of the Indian dancer was in response to the "ideal" characteristics of Indian womanhood that was drawn from two main sources, as described by Gandhi:

The ideal imagery of woman was consolidated from two main sources – the image of a respectable woman of the family (specifically a middle and upper class portrayal of a Hindu family woman) and the ideal, Indian feminine image portrayed on the temple walls. These became the main source for the Odissi body. The objective was to homogenise the cultural practices, to obtain a uniform national culture, keeping the regional variants intact, minus their profanities to serve the emerging modernity in the nation without transgressing its ethics, morals, and values (Gandhi 2009, p.4).

These important women revivalists, and reformers, Rukmini Devi, Sanjukta Panigrahi, and Chandralekha, have been influential in my own development, explorations, and transgressions of the dance tradition, through the teachings and lineage of my teachers. In the wake of these early pioneers of Indian feminist dance reforms, I began to explore and focus on Hindu female iconography, where the feminine is portrayed as powerful, avenging, destructive, and sexually potent in the forms of Kali and Durga, in order to address feminist themes of Indian misogyny. "Abstract" concepts that had no narrative or theme, but celebrated the nuances and techniques of both western and Indian dance also became my practice. Also crucial to the argument of this project is the use of Kali iconography to dispute the domestication and subjugation of the feminine role designed by a predominantly (Indian) patriarchal society. The patriarchal attitude of domesticating Goddesses stems from what Soneji describes as "the forces of indigenous patriarchy, colonialism and nationalism, which are engaged in an ongoing debate between tradition and modernity" (Soneji 2012, p.13).

2.2.4. Spivak, Sen, and Sati: Indian Feminism

My research-led performance practice has been invested in dismantling the Western perception of non-European feminism, by using predominantly Hindu goddess iconography. Kolkata born Columbia University professor, literary theorist, and author Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work is important to this research particularly as her works address key issues of this enquiry, mainly the devaluation of the female, and the reclamation or definition of Indian feminism as separate to Western feminism. The silencing of minorities, including women and the lower castes in Indian society, which, as direct consequences, led to misogynist atrocities still prevalent in modern India, are also areas where Spivak's theory of women as the "subaltern", or the voiceless minority, and disempowered gender, is relevant. Through her influential yet often-contentious essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1985)¹⁰, Spivak critiques the perspective of the Western intellectual's view on topics of the historical experience of the underprivileged. She suggests that Indian women, as both "object of colonialist history" and as "subject of insurgency" are rendered mute by the ideological gender construct that favours the male over female, a perception that is at the root of widespread female foeticide and infanticide in modern India. Spivak further argues that to assume the goddess culture of Hinduism is "proof of Hindu feminism", is incorrect (Spivak 2012, p. 34). Rather than invest in the powerful imagery of the warrior ten-armed Goddess Durga, it was the predominantly patriarchal mentality of Indian culture to glorify the tragic suicide of Sati, the consort of the God Shiva who throws herself into a sacrificial fire as a gesture of loyalty to her husband, and whose name was henceforth transformed into a noun that represented the act of widow self immolation, and which,

¹⁰ It was first published in the journal *Wedge* in 1985, as "Can the Subaltern Speak?: Speculations on Widow Sacrifice"; reprinted in 1988 as "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg's edited collection, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*; and revised by Spivak as part of her "History" chapter in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, published in 1999.

Spivak suggests, establishes women's "ideological self - debasement" (2012, pp.32-35).



Fig. 13. Chandralekha at SPACES, Chennai, Image in <<https://www.dtnext.in/>

Spivak's controversial comments are more than ever relevant in modern India, where the hypocrisy of goddess culture is evident in the prolific use of Goddess iconography for commercial and political advertisements. Social anthropologist Dr. Atreyee Sen, in her article "The Hindu Goddess In Indian Politics" in *Political Theology Today* (2015), comments on how politicians and nationalists use Hindu iconographies as "grand gestures of self-promotion", noting that:

Even though the democratic constitution of the nation-state has been modelled on western varieties of secularism, everyday politics is infused with religious iconographies. Political mobilisation rests on this intersection between the sacred and the profane (Sen, 2015).

Sen describes the use of Hindu Goddess iconography as dangerous in the light of current rape atrocities, including criticisms of a recent social-media "trending" article on domestic abuse, which depicted jewel and silk-attired models wearing fake "bruising" to demonstrate domestic violence, saying:

Several feminist scholars further criticized the campaign: this form of consumer-driven, advertisement-based feminist politics isolated the experiences of poor women or Muslim women who were also maltreated by men, but didn't identify with upper caste Brahmanical deities dressed in silk. (Sen, 2015).

This project does not allow for a more detailed explanation of the caste system, which, as an influence on every facet of Indian society, is responsible for many of the atrocities committed against women and female children, a topic central to the late Mala Sen's work.

Indian feminist and activist Mala Sen (b. 1947-2011), is best known for her famous book on the female bandit, outlaw, and folk heroine Phoolan Devi. Sen's publication, *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi* (1991) was made into an award winning and controversial film *Bandit Queen* (1994).¹¹ She was a passionate advocate for human and women's rights, and her books researching misogynist crimes in India are the source of several of my performance works including *Suttee* (1992 & 1997), and *Bandit Queen* (2004), while *Disturbing Elements* (2008), was drawn from Sen's *Death by Fire: Sati, Dowry Death, and Female Infanticide in Modern India* (2001), which included modern Indian news reportage of atrocities, and eye-witness records (from the eighteenth century) of *sati*. *Sati* is prevalent in many Indian regions, due to the practice of child marriage. Many young women and girls as young as seven are forced into

¹¹ *Bandit Queen* was also a spoken word dance performance segment in my 2004 dance production *Women in Transit*, where I used transcripts of interviews with Phoolan Devi.

marriages with much older men, resulting in horrific cases of abuse and in many cases enforced *sati*. The sacrifice of burning their bodies on their husband's funeral pyres are said to bring "honour" to their families, and assuring them of a goddess status in the afterlife (Mala Sen, 2001 pp.31-50).¹²

The topic of *sati* is too complex and extensive to elaborate on in this exegesis, but is important as not only symbolic of past misogynist crimes, but a reminder that in one form or another, it represents crimes against women's rights in modern India. Jennifer Burshaw's essay "Suicide or Sacrifice? An examination of the *Sati* Ritual in India" (2007) addresses the history and origins of the practice as debated by scholars of the early Aryan era through to the British colonial times. Her detailed accounts echo the research of Sen that I have already included in this chapter. The practice of widow-burning combines strong spiritual beliefs with secular power conflicts globally. Widow-burning in India has long been strongly debated, but this exegesis cannot expand further on the topic. Burshaw cites Joerg Fisch's *Burning Women*, (2005), which is the first history of the anthropological, religious, social, and political contexts of widow burning across the world.

There are countless articles, essays and documentaries on the subject of misogynist atrocities in modern India to support the hypocrisy of a culture that exploits sacred female iconography (for example there are no Hindu male icons used for political advertising campaigns, since India is said to be female, and has been depicted as "Mother India"), while crimes against females escalate daily. In order to argue the significance of Kali iconography to protest the violence against women, this research has included viewing many documentaries, including *India's Missing Girls* (2012), by director Ashok Prasad, describing the tragic consequences of female infanticide and

¹² Mala Sen, cited as well as Dr. Areyee Sen in this chapter.

foeticide, *India's Daughter* (2015) directed by Leslie Unwin, detailing the horrific 2012 gang rape and mutilation of Jyoti Singh on a Delhi bus, and *It's A Girl: The Three Deadliest Words in the World* (2012) on female infanticide in India and China, directed by Evan Grae Davis.

2.3. The Stereotypical "intercultural" body

Of equal importance in my work is the necessity to address the prejudice faced by non-European artists, including cultural stereotyping, racial profiling, and cultural appropriation that distinguishes their experiences from Western feminist perspectives. Consequently, the writings of both non-western and western scholars who have reflected on the complexities of intercultural experience have been important to my performance practice. Though many of the early debates of Bharucha's *Theatre and the World* (1993), *In the Name Of The Secular* (1998), Homi Bhaba's *The Location Of Culture* (1994), Richard Schechner's *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (1985), and Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta's *Conversations on Art and Performance* (1999) were part of my early research (during this project) in intercultural performance studies, I have selected only those influences that are most relevant to this project, and specifically on feminist performance practices. The difference of western and eastern approaches to feminist performance is also significant, since performers engaged in an intercultural performance practice bear the added necessity of justifying, validating and proving "authenticity".

In this context, the influential Vietnamese filmmaker, writer, literary theorist, composer, and professor Trinh T Minh-ha (b.1952) discusses the issue of what is considered "authentic" in intercultural work. Even today, over thirty years after her essay, *Difference: A Special Third World Women Issue* (1987) still remains relevant for intercultural artists, and women in particular. She argues that the definition of "difference" problematizes the ways in which the "other", typically non-white artists are measured against western standards. These

expectations, she argues, create a certain ideology of separatism that permeates the issue of the disadvantaged non-white woman. She also references non-European women who have had to repeatedly address audiences to explain their "unique-ness" (Minh-ha 1987, p.13).

The challenge of presenting specific iconographies to represent national culture is complex. Artists who identify with more than one culture, as well as the spaces in between, and who may be constantly in transit, should not be censured for it. The concept of artists inhabiting the "spaces in between" inspired two key works of mine that attempted to highlight the hybrid quality of work made by artists who live "between two cultures" or are displaced and chose to identify with either both or one culture. *Woman In Transit* (2002, Performance Space, Sydney) was a solo dance theatre work that developed during my two-year Australian Dance Fellowship awarded by Australia Council (2001-2002, Sydney). The work incorporated satirical spoken word sequences with dance, storytelling, and framed by projections of my visual art. Parodies that were particularly appreciated were my exaggerated reenactment of Western contemporary dance approaches to movement and process, including "release-based" dance techniques, the "contemporary neutral gaze" and a final work titled *Don't call me Butoh*, parodying dancers who randomly adopt tokenistic aspects of extremely complex culturally-specific dance traditions. An excerpt of my dance theatre work *Mindimi The Burmese Princess* (1999, PICA) was also included in this work.

Women in Transit (2004, Performance Space, Sydney), was an extension of this idea. I invited two women artists with similar experiences of living and working in an adopted country and showcased three perspectives on the theme of displacement. DD Dorvillier contrasted her Puerto Rican childhood with her dance practice in New York, while Melbourne based Japanese dancer Yumi Umiumare's work described her constant moving between Japan and Australia. My contribution was to use characteristic iconic female personas, including the Bandit Queen and an Indian politician who is assassinated while

waving and walking on a red carpet, among other shorter vignettes. By using performance personae, where I incorporate hybrid female iconographies, I continually attempt to transgress and subvert cultural stereotype.

2.4. Western Dance Influences

My desire to move beyond technique and the classical tradition was also in order to explore themes beyond traditional choreography, where the female is always depicted as the pining heroine, or a consort to a male deity such as Shiva, Krishna, or Vishnu. In order to understand the western body, I also undertook an eight-year dance study at Ruth Osborne's *Contemporary Dance Centre* (Perth), from 1980 onwards. These explorations or experiments in dance were always firmly kept as separate to my Indian dance practice, which I was simultaneously engaged with. Traditional repertoire as taught to me by my teachers were never re-interpreted or experimented with, while dance technique that did not involve sacred gesture, became the groundwork for my exploration. This exploration into western dance techniques was facilitated by my first teaching role at WAAPA (West Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Perth) in 1988, and consequent periods in 1992 and 1993, exposing me to western dancers, training structures and traditions.

Throughout the nineties, during my time as artistic director of my cross-cultural dance company *Kalika* (1990 to 1998), I continued my own dance research practice of western dance and body awareness methodologies. Through collaborations and participation in other directors' work, these encounters and experiences were influential in the development of my evolving performance practice. My process also evolved through choreographing for my company *Kalika* dance (1990-1998), when I created several major dance productions using mainly contemporary western dance trained dancers. I integrated many of the western movement techniques with Indian dance vocabulary, including contact improvisation, release-based technique, and contemporary dance

styles, including the Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham techniques. In contrast to the strict stylised forms of Indian Classical dance, release-based techniques dramatically changed my approach to choreography. Joan Skinner, who is an American choreographer who danced with Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, pioneered SRT, or Skinner Releasing technique. SRT incorporates improvisation, dance technique, and the principal of "letting go" (hence referred to as release-based techniques) of strictly imposed dance traditions. In my case, this involved overcoming the rigid mental and physical restrictions of my strict Indian classical training that did not use body contact, floor work, or improvisation.

In 2000, on a Creative Fellowship from Arts WA, I studied with Rosalind Crisp at *Omeo Dance Studio* in Sydney for an intensive one-on-one practice of release-based method, which dramatically changed my approach to the body and awareness of its relationship to space. In 2001, during my Australia Council Fellowship, I practiced this technique with renowned practitioner DD Dorvillier during a month-long residency in her *Future Human Studios*, New York. All these influences, framed by my primary training in Indian classical dance, contributed to my ongoing development of intercultural performance. These movement techniques also facilitated my specific practice of using tradition as transgression, as my work in recent years has taken a clearer direction towards feminist performance activism.

Having described all the elements that have determined my present practice, the next chapter is dedicated to illustrating how I have used Kali iconography as both performance method and artistic substance in order to address intercultural, feminist performance iconography.

Chapter Three: Kali: Goddess of Chaos and Transcendence

Introduction

*In dense darkness O Mother, Thy formless beauty sparkles:
Therefore the yogis mediate in a dark mountain cave.
In the lap of boundless dark, on Mahanirvana's¹³ waves upborne,
Peace flows serene and inexhaustable.
Taking the form of Void, in the robe of darkness wrapped,
Who art Thou, Mother, seated alone in the shrine of sāmādhī¹⁴?
From the Lotus of Thy fear-scattering Feet flash Thy love's lightnings;
Thy Spirit-face shines forth with laughter terrible and loud!*

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p.692.

This chapter introduces the Goddess Kali as the central motif in this scholarly investigation and as the main iconography referenced in my practice, following Chapter Two, which introduced influential figures who reformed the tradition in dance. For centuries the iconic images of two religious entities in particular, the Madonna or Virgin Mary, and the Goddess Kali have held prominent positions in the spiritual and social construct of Christian, primarily Catholic, and Hindu societies respectively. As a performance artist, my practice questions the motivation, inspiration, and relevance of performance activism in relation to these iconic figures. By employing representations of Kali or Mary, emblematic of religious faith, I investigate the following questions. Firstly, can the artist employ religious iconography in order to engage in social, political, and feminist activism through their work? Secondly, does my research attempt to understand whether censorship, and the rise of religious fundamentalism affect this practice?

¹³ Mahanirvana: The highest, greatest state of enlightenment.

¹⁴ Samādhī: spiritual ecstasy.

This chapter also articulates the specific attributes identified with Kali, such as her tongue, her hair, and her garland of heads among others, not only in order to situate Kali in the contemporary moment, but in order to demonstrate the ways in which these attributes have been explored through my earlier performance works. While this exegesis does not allow for an extended discussion of the similarities and differences between the Christian Madonna and the Hindu Kali, it paves the way for future studies based on these comparisons. My discussion of Kali in this chapter, and in particular, the persistence of her presence through my performance practice over many years, is undertaken to demonstrate the evolution of my practice which this exegesis argues, is central to the development of *Urban Kali*, the new work. Just as I have described the classical training that underpins my dance vocabulary in Chapter One, this section situates Kali's relevance to my practice in particular, and to the contemporary world more broadly; specifically, as a form of feminist performance protest, which forms the argument of this enquiry.

Kali, as a goddess could never conform to either colonial values or Hindu ideals of domesticated Indian femininity. As Dr. Aretyee Sen remarked in her article on Hindu Goddess iconography frequently exploited in Indian political advertising campaigns, "Thus Kali the bloodthirsty and unpredictably violent goddess could not be included in the campaign, as it would be impossible to represent her as a victim of abuse." (Sen, 2015), which further supports the argument and motivation for feminist protest in performance (using Kali iconography). Kali may have been appropriated for many reasons, but she is beyond politicising, patronising, or transforming to suit the needs of any society. Whether her iconography is a valid representative of feminist performance protest will be argued in this exegesis, and through the creative work, *Urban Kali*. Consequently, Kali's significance and attributes are examined in the context of my own

work, which has employed Kali iconography in dance and durational ritual contemporary performances since 1990. Kali symbolises time, change, and destruction of ignorance, and no more so than in Tantric Hinduism. Tantric Hinduism is a ritually oriented spiritual practice that seeks to gain release or salvation through knowledge of the mysteries of the body and soul. The wild, chaotic iconography of Kali encourages her devotees to confront a world that is in continuous chaos. Her imagery challenges the devotee or the viewer to come to terms with the inevitable cycle of death and rebirth, and provokes them to a higher spiritual understanding. As a goddess with a reputation for inciting terror and love, who is also understood as the destroyer of time - or *Kala* - who better to represent the plight of women today?

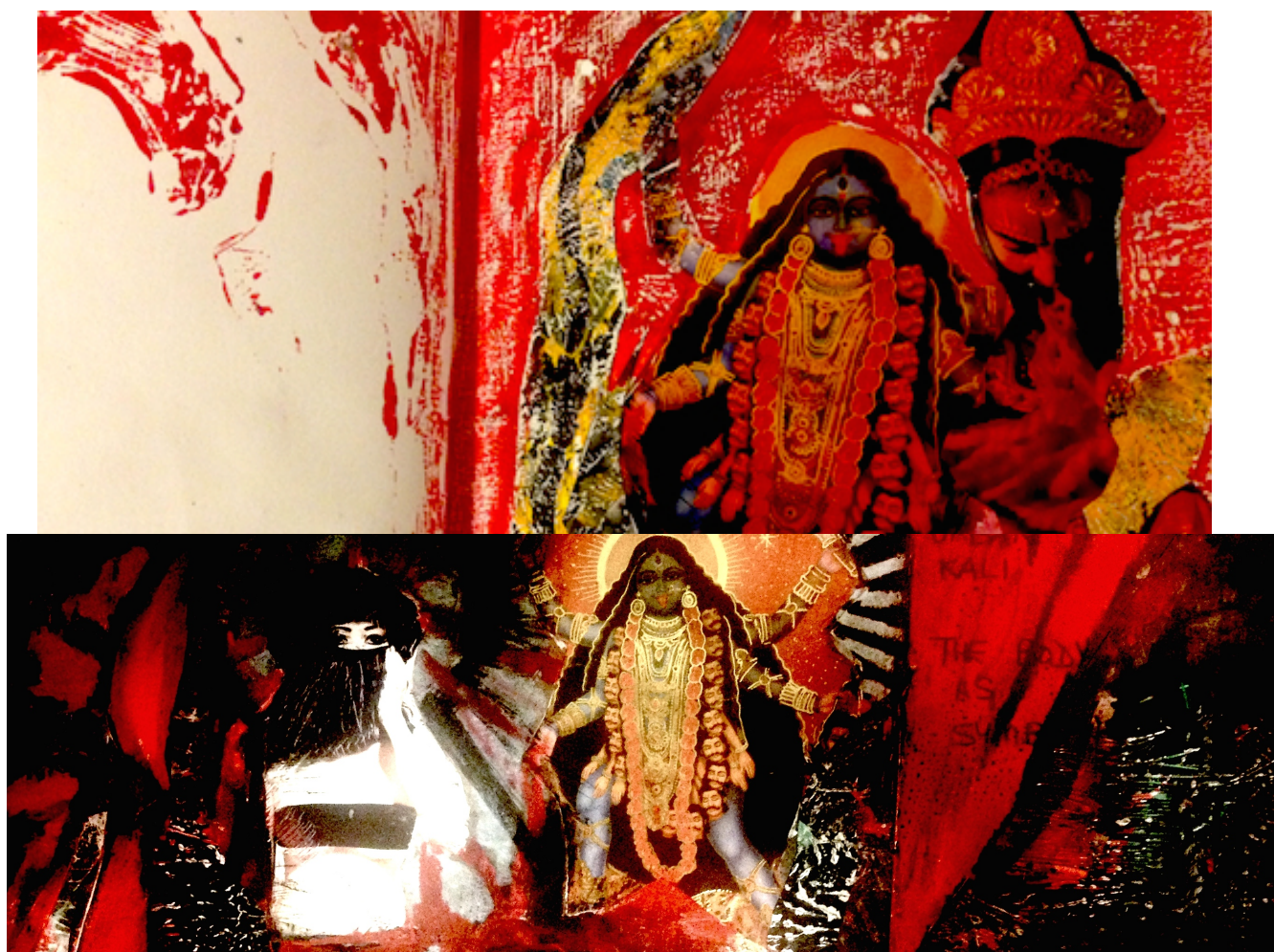


Fig.14. and Fig.15. Rakini Devi Journal painting/collage using Kali posters, inks and oil pastels, 2017.

3.1 Kali: a personal relationship

My relationship with Kali began during my childhood growing up in Kolkata India, and has inevitably influenced my approach to those questions. I was particularly drawn to the Goddess Kali because of her unique position within the Hindu pantheon of deities, and because she represents characteristics utterly opposite to those associated with the Virgin Mary, whose image I grew up with, during my Catholic convent education. The comparison with the Madonna is instructive. Whereas the Virgin Mary, or Madonna, as the mother of Jesus Christ, represents the ideal woman as comfortingly maternal, Kali represents the dangerous, destructive forces of the divine feminine, one who defies all acceptable – arguably patriarchal - rules of Indian society. Whereas Mary is depicted either holding the Christ child or the dead body of Christ in her arms, or on her lap (the *pietà*), Kali is seen dancing wildly in cremation grounds and battlefields. These two aspects of female religious iconography form the inspiration for my performance persona *Kali Madonna* (2014). By merging the image of both Mary and Kali, my performance persona seeks to embody apparently contradictory or perhaps complementary aspects of the divine feminine, the maternal Madonna and the fierce protectress Kali in order to present a more holistic or complete female image, one that is unconstrained and who rejects domestication and subjugation to patriarchal desires. Representations of the goddess Kali have evolved over time, since the early medieval period, around A.D. 600 (Kinsley 1988, p.116) to the present day. In tracing her journey from ancient India to the modern world, this chapter draws on the work of both Indian and Western scholars, as well as describing her iconographies, and more importantly, in order to demonstrate the means by which I have sought to unsettle expectations by employing this confronting imagery. This chapter argues that representations of Kali are inherently subversive, and I have been particularly interested in creating even more exaggerated aspects of traditional Kali motifs through my choreographic, live art, and painting practice.

In keeping with the characteristics of Kali worship, my methodology which employs traditional visual and gestural motifs in order to transgress against Indian social mores in particular, and patriarchal repression of women in general, involves a process that sees me representing potentially taboo religious imagery, dismantling traditional dance vocabulary, and taking artistic and cultural risks in the performance of sacred iconography. Despite repositioning sacred iconography, I remain respectful of the classical dance tradition, and in many of my performance works, I sought permission or approval from Hindu scholars and priests when using sacred Kali poetry. This was particularly the case in *Kali Digambar* (1995), which employed devotional hymns to Kali.

3.2. Kali: the Literature

In tracing the evolution of Kali from pre-colonial (before 1858) to post-colonial India (1947 onwards) this section examines how visual representations of Kali have been interpreted by countless scholars, from both western and eastern cultures, who share a fascination for the many aspects of this unique Goddess, who in her very image, straddles the sacred and secular duality of life. As American Religious Studies scholar, Herman Tull notes, recent academic studies on Kali reflect a general trend towards the scholarship of the "divine feminine in all its manifestations" as exemplified by the writings of Rachel Fell McDermott & Jeffrey J. Kirpal's *Encountering Kali* (2005), Elizabeth U Harding's *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar* (1993), Ajit Mookerjee's *Kali The Feminine Force* (1988), and John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff's *Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (1986). All of these publications have contributed to a deepening understanding of the unique place Kali holds not only in the religious but also the popular imagination.

Tull suggests that this interest in Hindu culture has led to research methodology that integrates the fields of psychology, anthropology, and literary studies, in order to create

eclectic tools for study (Tull 2015, pp.301-332). Following Tull, this exegesis also argues that American Religious Studies Scholar, David Kinsley (b. 1939 – 2000) provides the most informative insights into Kali culture through publications such as his seminal book, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (1988). Kinsley in another essay, "Blood and Death Out of Place: Reflections on the Goddess Kali" (1982), usefully explores the many approaches to Kali's association with danger, death, and disruption. He describes her terrifying appearance as a fusion of the contrasting roles of divine mother and destroyer, and how through chaos, Kali paradoxically offers order, balance, and transcendence (pp.144-152):

Kali puts the order of dharma in perspective, perhaps puts it in place, by reminding the Hindu that certain aspects of reality are untamable, unpurifiable, unpredictable, and always threatening society's feeble attempts to order what is disorderly: life itself (Kinsley, 1982 p.152).

Kinsley goes on to suggest, that Kali's position, standing outside the conservative laws of religion and society, can be perceived as a positive force, one that drives humans to seek a wider, sometimes dangerous path, to redemption and spiritual freedom (1982, p.152). Conversely, in British colonial India, Kali was considered not only barbaric but vulgar, by not conforming to the Indian/Hindu image of monogamous, domesticated female sexuality. By that I mean Kali did not adhere to British ideals of Indian women, nor did she appear as the "acceptable" exotic, richly adorned jeweled and crowned goddesses typically depicted in Hindu goddess iconography. Tull cites many nineteenth-century Indologists who describe Kali in outraged expressions of disgust and revulsion. British Sanskrit scholar, Sir Monier Williams' description of Kali in 1891 for instance, describe her as demonic, and one who represents "the worst results of the worst superstitious ideas that have ever disgraced and degraded the human race" (in Tull 2015, p.302). As Tull also describes, colonial British sensibilities, focused exclusively on attributes pertaining to hideous acts of apparently random decapitations,

bloody animal and human sacrifice, and sexual practices that were repulsive, depraved and grotesque, subsequently branding the worship of Kali as belonging to "primitive" Indian aboriginal and tribal culture (2015, p.302). Since Indian independence, however, Kali's image has been rehabilitated over time so that worship of Kali has been restored and her popularity has grown. Ironically she is now one of the most (western) culturally appropriated Hindu goddesses, precisely for the very images that shocked and horrified European sensibilities previously.



Fig. 16 Rakini Devi, *Kali Digambar*, Perth 1990, photographer Ashley De Prazer.

According to Indian freelance author, Seema Mohanty's *Book of Kali* (2004), Kali's relevance in modern India, as well as her growing popularity globally, stems perhaps ironically from both European Imperialism and radical feminism. Mohanty's explanation describes how Kali's ghoulish iconography was sufficient incentive for the ruling British

in India to convert and "civilise" the natives. She goes on to suggest that equally, it is the defiance so characteristic of Kali's fierce imagery, that may be understood as emblematic of the female collective conscience, that sought liberation from the prevailing patriarchal system (Mohanty, 2004, p.5).

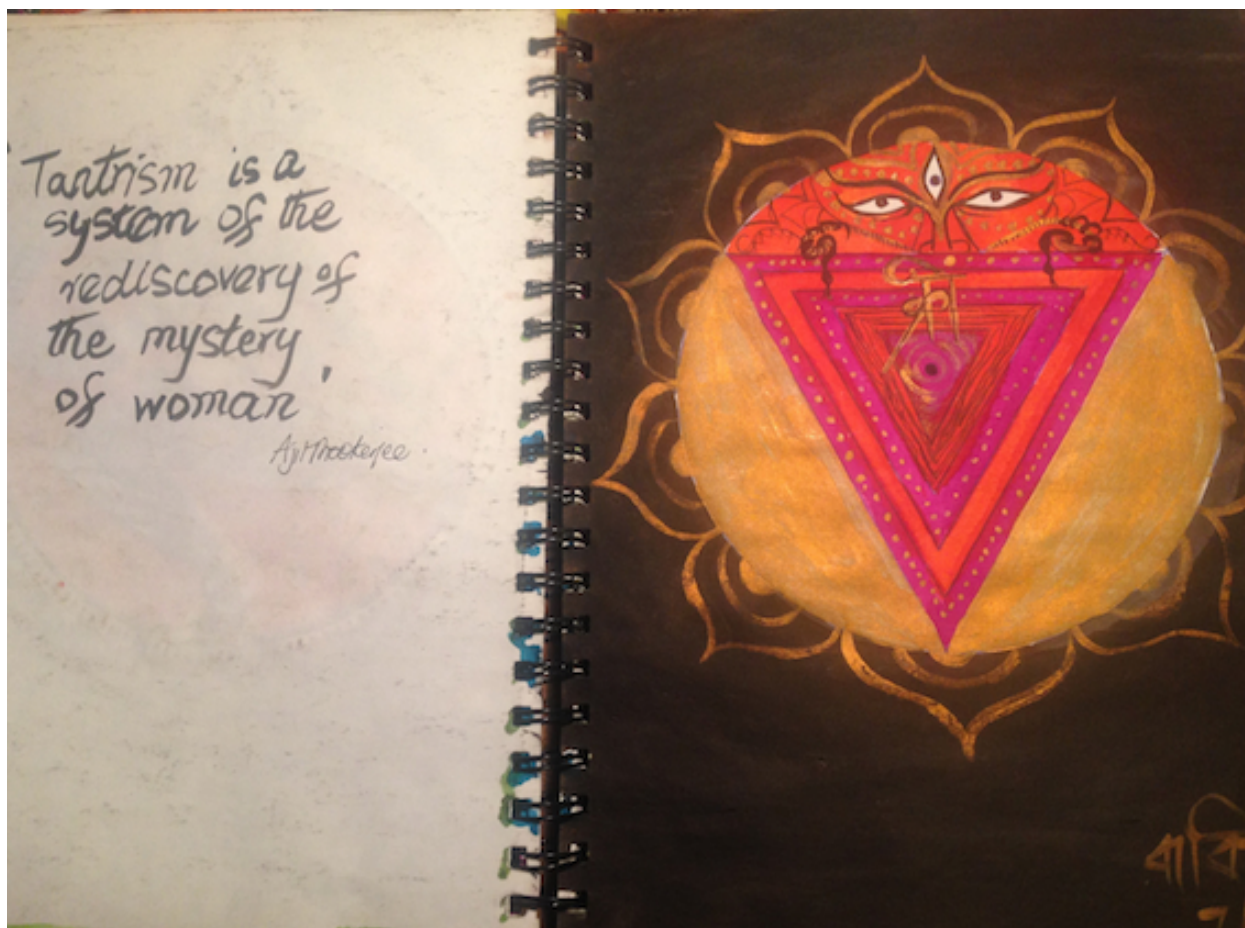


Fig. 17. Rakini Devi's *Kali Digambar Journal*, 1994.

Writing in 1955, German scholar, Indologist and historian of South Asian Art, Henrich Zimmer's *The Art of Indian Asia*, describes Indian art in ways that resonate both with my experience and employment of extreme or exaggerated aspects of traditional Indian classical dance forms and sacred Hindu iconography. As Zimmer notes, what is typical of Indian art, is its ability to go to "the very limits of delight and terror, and even to press beyond them, to the presentation of both the wonders of the world's sensual charm, and of the hair-raising, horrifying aspects of destructive forces" (1955, p.135). Kali's

rebellious and sacrilegious iconographies are a construction of extreme imagery, assaulting the senses and intentionally confronting the uninitiated. She is both intoxicating and inspiring, and is the "power symbol embodying the unity of the transcendental" (Mookerjee 1988, p.61).

Kali is depicted in many paintings and *murtis* or idols, dancing wildly on battlefields or graveyards. Her naked body smeared with the ash from cremation grounds, adorned with a garland of decapitated human heads, and wearing a girdle of severed hands, her red tongue protruding, her hair a wild black cloud, Kali challenges attitudes of female shame, and sexuality as explored in Tantric Hindu philosophies.

3.3. Reclaiming Kali

In Tantric depictions, Kali is seen seated on Shiva in intercourse, to signify the balance of male and female principals. Shiva is depicted as passive and corpse-like, to indicate that the male principal is static without his female *shakti* or power. Mookerjee quotes from the ancient sacred texts the *Bramavaivarta Purana*, "I, the Lord of all, am a corpse without you" (1988, p.40). The singular fascination of Tantric Hinduism by the west has been the aspect of "Tantric Sex", the source of lucrative New Age corporations and another forms of cultural appropriation. Dr. Sthaneshwar Timalsina in his essay "Tantra and the West" (2015), suggests that the Western fascination with Tantra stems from the perceived exoticism centered around orgasmic rituals, capturing the imagination, and endorsing the enjoyment of the forbidden. "In fact, any practice not grounded on monotheistic belief is transgressive to the common western psyche," states Timalsina (2015). Western cultural appropriation of Tantric Hinduism, and specifically Kali, is further discussed in Rachel Fell McDermott's *Encountering Kali: In The Margins, at the Centre, in the West* (2005). Her chapter titled "Kali's New Frontiers: A Hindu Goddess on the Internet"(pp.273 -290) is relevant to my argument of using Kali iconography as a protest against western cultural appropriation.

McDermott discusses the impact of Kali on the media, New Age literature, and "products", ranging from books on astrology and tarot cards, including the influence of the Internet as a religious resource. The most crucial of the arguments debated by McDermott centre on the use of Kali iconography used in western interpretations via film, television, commercial advertisements, and products as examples of indiscriminate cultural appropriation. This is a topic I have explored through performance research since the early nineties, when so-called New Age culture was growing rapidly as a trend.

My response to New Age cultural appropriation of Hinduism was expressed in many works, but most notably in a satirical spoken word dance performance *The Virtual Goddess* (1998 Perth, Sydney, Canberra and Byron Bay). In it, I satirised New Age "Tantric workshop facilitators", fake "Oracles", and more. Through satire, I protested the lucrative business of cultural appropriation of Hindu religious iconography and philosophy by Western New Age practitioners. As Grehan describes in her essay "Rakini Devi: Diasporic Subject and Agent Provocateur" (2003):

From her vantage point as the diasporic subject who exists both within and outside Australian cultural life, Devi has the potential to intervene politically and to challenge practices she sees as flawed or dangerous. The issues that she critiques most often are the appropriation of aspects of Hindu spirituality by western culture... Devi responds to these issues in performance through a number of hilariously funny sequences. Her humour is political and, in the case of the use of Hindu spirituality in western culture, challenges the ways in which Eastern traditions are effortlessly and erroneously appropriated (often without regard for context) in the contemporary "spirituality" market (Grehan 2003, pp.237-238).

Two decades later, the Internet now dominates a global, un-monitored source of manufactured, unlimited trends in "spirituality", where Barbie doll-Kalis jostle with sexualised, kitsch versions of Hindu iconography, including recreational "Kali-costumes" used in burlesque, cabaret, Halloween, and other Western traditions that exploit eastern and indigenous cultures. McDermott's research on how newer "Indianised" versions of Kali, including Bengali Kali, whose iconography I mainly use, is situated within the multiple versions of western Kali iconography. Current Kali trends, including the extensive use of Kali iconography by Western feminists, explains McDermott, reaches far back as the early nineteenth century when the west's fascination with Indian spirituality grew into such movements as the Transcendentalists, Theosophists, and Spiritualists.¹⁵ McDermott's observations resonate strongly with my own research questions, when she asks: "How are we to interpret (1) The increasingly western and idiosyncratic interest in Kali by feminists and New Age groups, and, by contrast, (2) her new Indianisation?"(2005, p. 285). Even though critique of ongoing Western appropriation of Kali iconography is explained as a "consequence of religious globalization" (p.285), McDermott acknowledges that other Kali enthusiasts are attempting to rein in the exploitation of western, feminist or New Age interpretations of Kali iconography by focusing on the Indian, and in my case, her Bengali origins. They are also in protest to the widespread commercially lucrative cultural appropriations of Kali iconography (Fig. 19 and 20.).

¹⁵ The late sixties and seventies brought with it more popular trend setters and other counter culture groups and writers, for example, Aldous Huxley, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and his followers including The Beatles, and famous Hollywood actors, musicians and the "hippie" movement (McDermott, p.285). This appetite for high states of consciousness, suggests McDermott, led many westerners towards joining movements for example the Hare Krishna, the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society and other similar organizations, which flourish today, but, as many Indian-born Kali devotees like myself note, bear little resemblance to Hindu culture or tradition, having been institutionalized and westernized beyond recognition. While the West was experiencing a sexual and spiritual revolution, the seventies in India was also an era where many of my generation were "reclaiming" or discovering our own culture, while witnessing the influx of Western pilgrims in search of Indian spirituality.



Fig.18. Kali seated in intercourse on Shiva: <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/himalayan-buddhist-art-101-controversial-art-part-4-female-nude/>

Kali, in all her virtual representations and in her many cross-cultural borrowed forms, are in themselves a strong argument for my own performed versions of Kali iconography, drawn from my Bengali roots. By often fusing Kali with Catholic religious iconography I seek not only to reference colonial influences on Hinduism, but also to acknowledge my secondary school education at a Catholic Convent. My hybrid interpretation of Kali iconography, while drawn from a personal, experiential source, at all times references and pays homage to Kolkata Kali, as Divine Mother and Shakti Supreme (Female energy).

In the next section I describe some of Kali's attributes, and in particular those I have used in key performances, in order to transgress or subvert conventional representations of women.



Fig.19. Kali Halloween costume(<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2053992/Heidi-Klum-stripped-completely-bare-Halloween.html>)

Fig.20. "Kali Zena" doll (http://www.angelfire.com/grll/xena_toys/prototypes/custom/Joanna_Bond.html)

3.4. Kali: the feminine divine and her attributes

Kali has a litany of names used in prayers and hymns. I use the word litany because it is recited in lengthy prayers and invocatory songs and mantras. Her name derives from the Sanskrit word *kala*, or time, suggesting therefore that Kali is timeless, and transcends time. I chose the name, *Kalika*, another name for the Goddess, for my first and only dance company (1991-1998). Kali is associated with the colour black. Her form is black, her priests wear black, she is worshipped on new moon black nights, and her dark complexion is in total contrast to the attributes that fair-skinned female beauty represents (in Indian society) such as domestication and gentility.

Skin

Kali's complexion is said to be as black as the limitless void, and in Tantric Hindu texts is called *Digambari* (clad in space). Blackness, both as colour and concept, has multiple meanings, most often used to characterize Kali's skin. My 1995 production, *Kali Digambar* presented by my Perth-based Kalika dance company pays homage to the goddess who is "sky-clad" (*digambar*) and clothed in infinity. In that early work, the focus was on a cross-cultural dance vocabulary that extended to the live music aspect, which consisted of a classical Indian Carnatic singer, Jeya Ponuthurai, and Aboriginal (Yamatji) didgeridoo player Stephen Compton. The work celebrated sacred Kali hymns, and a strong Indian classical dance inspired choreography. Filmmaker John Harrison used Super 8 film to create sequences in black and white and in "bleach" stained colours to imbue the footage with an antique aesthetic. In contrast, my doctoral work, *Urban Kali*, takes a more abstract and conceptual approach, by distilling images of Kali's "blackness". Reviews of *Kali Digambar* 1995 are presented in the appendix of performances at the end of this exegesis.

Three Eyes of Kali

In Bengali Kali iconography, Kali is always depicted with three eyes, representing the past, present and future. In many Kali iconographies, she is represented as three eyes within a black sphere. The painting of three eyes on a red forehead is characteristic of all my performance personas, based on paintings of Kali and Tibetan Goddess iconography, and my own signature designs that incorporate Indian dance markings and eye makeup.

The Garland of Heads

Traditionally the garland of severed heads worn by Kali represents the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, symbolising the repository of knowledge. The garland of heads also

signifies the ego, which is annihilated by the decapitation of the head, the seat of ego. In the context of my work *The Female Pope* (2010 ongoing), I have used Kali's iconography of the garland of human heads by employing a formidable eight-inch long



Fig. 21. Rakini Devi "Garland of Heads" in *The Two Madonnas*, Ex Teresa Museum, Mexico City, Image by Oliver Ludwig, 2014.

needle to pierce and then thread single miniature heads (constructed and painted by me) with red wool. This is a durational work that varies in length, and is sometimes incorporated at the end of my time-based performance installation *Audience with The Female Pope* (2010-2014: Finland, Sweden, USA, Mexico and Australia). The ritual gestures of unravelling the yarn of the wool, and snipping the final ends off the "garland" with a large pair of dressmaker scissors, invokes disturbing nuances of being dismembered with clinical yet violent undertones. This durational work undertaken in silence is in protest to the atrocities committed towards women in modern India. Treating everyday domestic objects as ritual artefacts, akin to those derived from sacred iconography characterises much of my performance practice. The "garland of

heads" actions have been used in several other works, for example *Kali Madonna* (2014). In the durational work *The Female Pope* (2013-2014) for instance, long metal, craft needles are used to simulate the piercing of the "sacred heart" of Mary, depicted in



Fig. 22. Rakini Devi, *An Audience with The Female Pope*, The GrayZone, New York, Image by Antoine Lutens, 2014.

many Catholic iconographies of Our Lady of Sorrows, also known as The Seven Sorrows, or seven swords that pierce the immaculate heart of Mary.

Hair

Kali's wild long hair, representing chaos, or "boundless freedom"(Harding, 1993, p.41), is often referred to in poetry as the curtain of *maya* or illusion. In Hindu secular tradition, unbound hair represents quite specific female ritual: the unmarried virgin plaits her hair; the married woman parts and knots her hair; while the widow is made to shave her head. I have used hair as a textural, sensual and sometimes frightening aspect of feminine portraiture, most recently in my durational works *Cone of Kali* (2017) and *Hair of Kali* (2016).

In *Cone of Kali*, a four-hour durational performance installation at *107 Projects*, Redfern, I was encased in a glass foyer/gallery space, in which I suspended long swathes of hair from the walls and stairways. I also used hair as textural material while embodying the "cone" (a large mesh black cone used later as the main prop in the new work, *Urban Kali*). I used a large pair of scissors to cut through long clumps of hair held in my mouth and covering my face, to reference or embody misogynist violence, and the dehumanising and traumatic acts against women. Hair, as representative of feminine beauty and desirability, are characteristics that are not only associated with Indian cultures, but in many others that impose the covering of hair, which represents sexual freedom, and therefore signify "dangerous" feminine sexuality. "Hair is thus the metaphor for sexuality-poised for fulfillment in the virgin, domesticated and controlled in the married woman, and stripped away in the widow", writes Mohanty (2004, p.12). Kali's wild disheveled hair defies the norms of Hindu society, and instead, flaunts her sexual, violent form.

Kali's Red Tongue

Kali's blood-red tongue has been the unresolved, endless subject of debate for many scholars, and often the sole, central topic for academic research. In traditional iconography, Kali's tongue is red, which, in Tantric Hinduism represents *rajas*, or the activating quality of nature, but there are opposing views of the symbolism of her protruding red tongue. When Kali is depicted in many of her iconographies stepping on Shiva's body, the traditional interpretation of the action of thrusting her tongue out is attributed to shame, for showing disrespect to her "husband" Shiva.¹⁶ But Tull's 2015 essay, "Kali's Tongue: Shame, Disgust, and the Rejection of Blood and Violence in Vedic and Hindu Thought", references Menon and Shweder, in their jointly authored

¹⁶ The word "husband" is encased in inverted commas because Kali was always an independent entity, before Hinduism was dominated by patriarchal values, that saw many female goddesses reduced to the role of consorts or wives to elevated, lesser known male deities.

study, "Kali's Tongue: Cultural Psychology and the Power of Shame in Orissa, India", (1994), where they debate conflicting opinions regarding Kali's protruding tongue and whether it represents shame or disgust (p. 305). Tull also cites Hindu scholar David Kinsley, who argues that Kali's tongue signifies the opposite of shame, and is instead indicative of a deliberately "anti-feminine" sensibility (p. 306):

Her tongue lolls out grotesquely, rudely, suggesting an insatiable, indiscriminate hunger and thirst. Kali insults, subverts, and mocks the social status quo, particularly as it defines proper behavior for women (Kinsley, 1997).

Kali's outstretched tongue is not only a symbol of defiance and blood lust, but is also apotropaic, meaning to avert evil. The tongue is used as ritual artifact in the context of my recent works such as the *Female Pope* and *Kali Madonna*. In these works, Kali's tongue is represented by a cascading flow of red wool from my mouth, in order to symbolise the "disgorging" of words, blood, and life-force. This visual metaphor also represents the blood spilt by women in misogynist atrocities, as depicted in my *Kali Madonna* performances presented in Mexico and Sydney (2014). In *Kali Madonna* I was attempting to integrate traditional representations of the calm and gentle Catholic Madonna with my Kali-iconographic-interventions. This hybrid approach to two female icons seeks to reclaim a more holistic view of the divine feminine, one in which all aspects are reconciled. Blood, used as a colour in my work also represents the life force, speech, anger, birth and annihilation.

Other Kali iconographies and attributes are important to describe here, because even though they are not all used individually or as the sole focus in my performance repertoire, they demonstrate that every part of Kali's body is laden with metaphor. These attributes of Kali that I describe briefly below are incorporated into my gesture language in dance or in durational live art installations. For example, all of the following attributes have been incorporated into the choreography in the new work *Urban Kali*, though they

would be impossible to isolate or explain in detail within the act of performance. They are used to give my own performance of ritualised, stylised gesture a meaning that fuels and gives integrity to a movement, which need not necessarily have to be understood by the audience. Some of these attributes are:

Kali's Four Arms

In many iconographies, of Kali depicted standing on Shiva, she is seen with four arms. One holds a severed head, which represents the annihilation of the ego. Another carries the (sacrificial) sword to sever the bondage to the physical self, while her right hand dispels fear, and the left points to spiritual strength (Mookerjee 1988,p.62).

Kali's "Girdle of Hands"

Other iconographies include her "girdle of hands", which represent action or *karma*. Mookerjee writes "She wears a girdle of human hands - hands are the principal instruments of work and so signify the action of *karma* or accumulated deeds, constantly reminding us that ultimate freedom is to be attained as the fruit of karmic action" (1988, p.62). I have used this iconography as dance movement and gesture in several of my choreographies, including the new work, *Urban Kali*.

The self-decapitating Kali (Chinnamasta)

Kali *Chinnamasta*, (Fig.24) who holds her own decapitated head in her hand, drinks from three spurting arches of blood from her severed neck. *Chinnamasta* is another aspect of Kali's nature of both giver and destroyer of life. The sacrifice of self-decapitation also signifies the maternal nurturing aspect of Kali as mother, who cuts off her own head to "feed" her devotees, often depicted in paintings with two attendants on either side of her. The "beheading" gesture (Fig. 25 from *Kali Digambar*, 1995) that is also a metaphor for the annihilation of the ego (the head), is also one that I frequently use in my choreography, which, though mainly consists of my own movement language, is often punctuated by specific motifs that reference Kali. "Decapitation"

gestures are used in many Indian classical dance repertoire when depicting themes of battle and in the context of goddess iconography.

Snakes

Kali also wears serpentine ornaments that are symbolic of asceticism. Snakes are frequently depicted also adorning the neck of Shiva, to represent the *Kundalini* Shakti. In *Kundalini: The Arousal of the Inner Energy* (1986), Mookerjee explains, "The Sanskrit word *Kundalini* means "coiled up". The coiled *Kundalini* is the female energy existing in latent form, not only in every human being, but in every atom of the universe" (1986, p.9). The unlocking or uncoiling of this energy symbolised by the snake, is achieved through yoga, meditation, and spiritual practice. I have used snake iconography painted on my body, and in the new work *Urban Kali*, it is the basis for a dance segment performed within a rotating projected *mandala*, or *yantra* (sacred Hindu diagram).



Fig. 23. Rakini Devi, "Kali's Tongue" in *Urban Kali*, video projections by Karl Ford, 2017.

3.5. Performing Kali: ritual and devotional act

A perhaps ironic characteristic in my work that is inseparable from the elements that shaped ritual Hindu classical dance is the notion of *Bhakti* or the devotional aspects of performance. My approach to performing Hindu Goddess iconography or dismantling Indian classical dance modes into a contemporary vocabulary does not stem from contesting the value of these classical or sacred traditions. Instead, my methodology for creating contemporary interpretations is to exaggerate traditional or classical dance modes and sacred themes, in order to highlight, extend, and translate certain nuances of the form. Experimenting and subverting these forms or gestures within the framework of a traditional structure forms the basis of my performance aesthetic. The body, as site and artistic material, is offered as a conduit for transformation through ritual, dance, and embodiment, and exemplifying the concept of tradition as transgression.

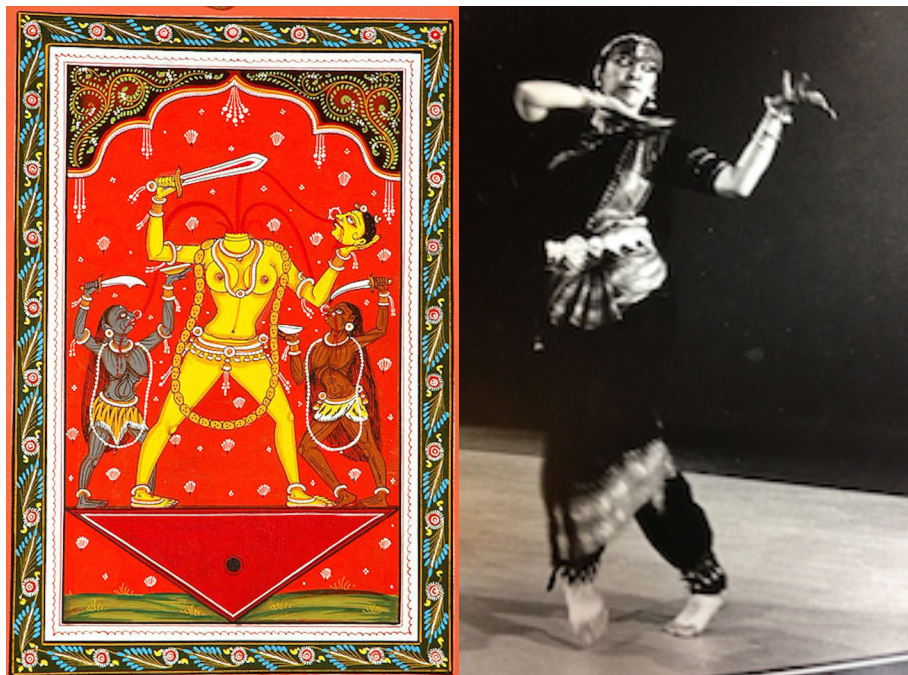


Fig. 24. (Left) Kali Chinnamasta the Goddess who cuts off her Own Head (Ten Mahavidya Series), watercolour on patti, artist Rabi Behera, 12.0 x 18.0.

Fig.25. (Right) Rakini Devi in *Kali Digambar*, PICA, Perth WA, 1995.

As outlined in Chapter One, my early approach to performing Kali iconography emerged from the ritual goddess worship in Bharatanatyam and Odissi dance traditions.

Devotion, or *bhakti*, is one of the main nine emotions expressed in stylised Indian classical dance. The nine emotions, or *Navarasa* are also a traditional item in the repertoire of Indian Classical dance, and are taught in all seven classical dance forms as training in *Abhinaya* or expressive dance. Choreographer and dancer Leela Samson has listed these categories in *Rhythm in Joy* (1987):

1. Sringara: Erotic
 2. Hasya: Comic
 3. Karuna: Compassionate
 4. Raudra: Terrible
 5. Vira: Heroic
 6. Bhayanaka: Fearsome
 7. Bhibhatsa: Disgusting
 8. Adbhuta: Marvellous
 9. Shanta: Peaceful
- (Samson 1987, p.24)

Abhinaya, or expressive dance, one aspect of traditional dance that I employ when creating contemporary dance may be either stylised or naturalistic.¹⁷ As Samson explains, the nuances of these terms can be difficult to define, particularly in Western dance terms. *Bhava* (or emotion) coupled with *rasa*, for instance, which may be understood as the essence or flavour of the performance is a quality I sought to portray in my work *Mudrasa* (1993) a title which combines the Sanskrit words for *mudra* (hand gesture) and *rasa* (essence). I use these descriptions as only one example of practical strategies when subverting tradition, and specifically to explain the context of *Kali Bhakti* (Devotion to Kali).

¹⁷ On my recent field trip to Chennai, India (Dec 2016/Jan 2017) where I immersed myself in three weeks of Indian classical dance recitals, I was able to connect personally with Leela Samson, and witnessed a solo recital of hers as well as attend a performance by Chandralekha's dance troupe, both of whom are cited in this exegesis.

In Vrinda Dalmiya's (2001) "Loving Paradoxes: A Feminist Reclamation of The Goddess Kali" she argues from a point of view that strongly resonates with my early approach to performing Kali iconography. Dalmiya's essay is based on *Kali Bhakti*, or "devotion to Kali", which can be used in the reconstruction of female identity, with the aim of "ethico-political struggles for justice" (p.125). I cite Dalmiya's essay as an example of how my early work, inspired by the sacred, evolved to a secular performance practice, and how I intentionally drew parallels between the sacred and secular by subverting traditional icons and dance traditions, whilst retaining the respect and acknowledgment of their source. I also concur with Dalmiya's argument that Kali iconography symbolises a complex fusion of paradoxical messages (2001, pp.125-126). She supports her argument by employing the devotional poems of the Kali devotee, Bengali saint, and poet Ramprasad Sen (1723 –1775). Ramprasad's poems were also the inspiration and text used for my dance production



Fig.26. "The Oracles of Kerela, The *Velichappadus*, Followers of Kali" Image by Tewfic El-Sawy, 2014.

production (1995) *Kali Digambar* (Kali "The sky-clad One") that approached performance as ritual and homage.

As an example of how Kali iconography is embodied or "performed", Tewfic El-Sawy's 2014 photo essay, "The *Velichappadu*, Followers of Kali" (Fig. 26), he describes the male and female devotees of Kali who are mediums and "revealers of light". These images of the embodied iconography of Kali, through ritual and costume, inspire my live art presentations and installations. Fig.27, from my journal, illustrates my fascination with Kali cults, who were also an inspiration for my 1995 dance production, *Kali Digambar*.

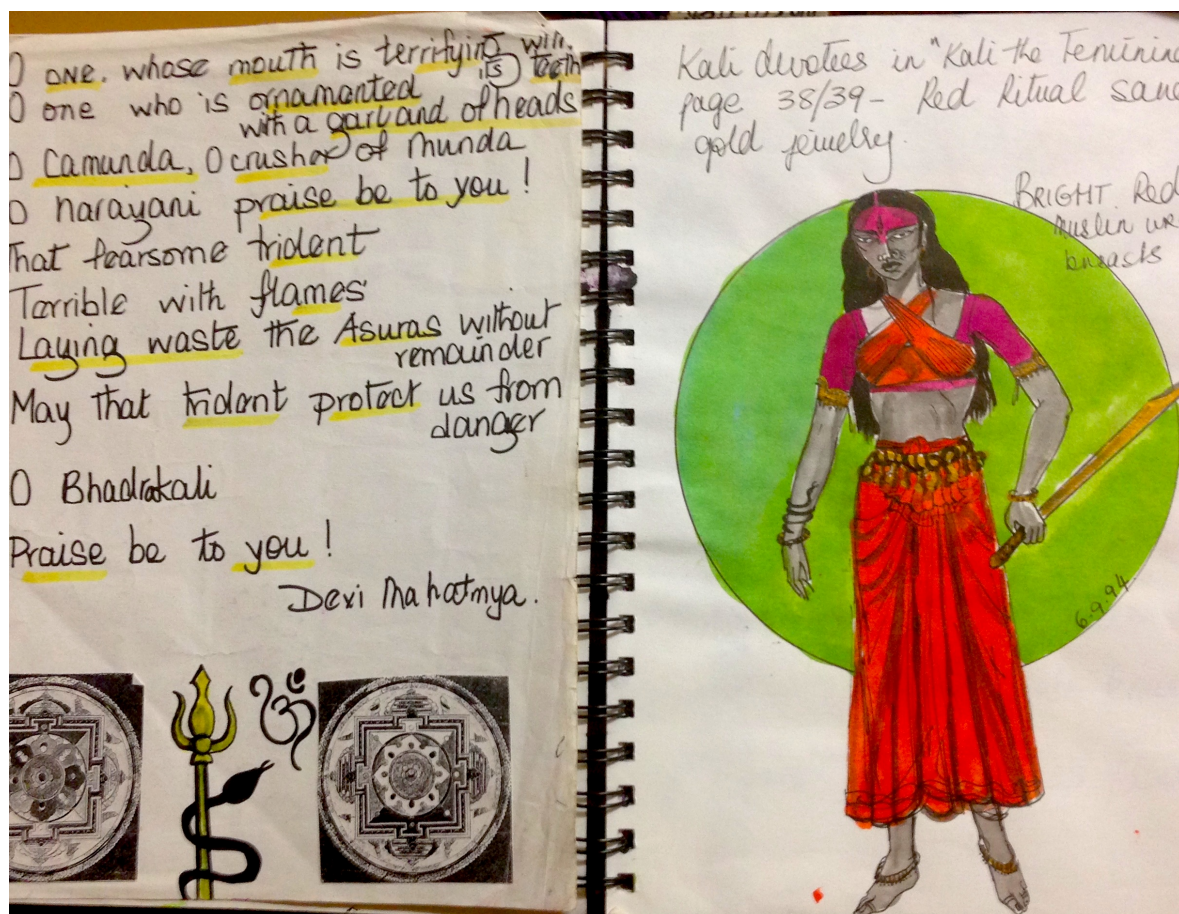


Fig. 27. Rakini Devi, *Kali Digambar* journal, 1995

This chapter has overviewed the complex entity of Kali in philosophy and contemporary culture and my understanding and use of her attributes. The next chapter elucidates modern contemporary artists who have been precedents and models for my practice.

Chapter Four: The Body as Ritual Artifact

Introduction

Chapter Three discussed my earlier performance works to contextualise my ongoing preoccupation with the Hindu goddess Kali, in order to ask whether religious iconography may be used to engage in cultural activism. This chapter is concerned with iconography as performance practice that transforms the body into what I describe as a "ritual artifact". In order to clarify my use of the terms used in my practice, I unpack some of the complexities in the context of my work that is, in part, drawn from religious and ritual dance traditions. In particular, this chapter explores the body's relationship with cultural and religious institutions, and the excess and extremes to which contemporary artists have taken this practice. Important to this research, specifically in the context of my own development, is my performance repertoire that subverts Hindu iconography in order to create works that address feminist activism. The "iconisation" of the body as site of performance methodology throughout my body of work, also serves as a means to transgress or subvert culturally specific iconography, including traditional concepts of gender, for example my performance of *The Female Pope*. Consequently, this chapter introduces artists from both the east and the west whose investigations of form, through dance, performance or live art, or in performative photography, have been important in helping me to articulate my practice. My use of "performance ritual" will also connect the artists discussed, as my precedents of practice, later in this chapter. Before I demonstrate these precedents of practice, I attempt to explain the differences or meaning of the terms *tradition*, *ritual*, or *ritualised* actions, specifically in the context of my own methodology.

In John Lowell Lewis' 2013 *The Anthropology of Cultural Performance*, his argument that Van Gennep's "three-part schema for understanding rites of passage was not particularly useful for other kinds of ritual activity with different aims" (Lowell Lewis 2013, p.62), resonates with my own problem in attempting to describe ritual as a method in my practice of iconography as performance.

"Performance appears as the iterative social construction of order that allows us to frame the extraordinary event and to cope with the challenge of chaos and absurdity" (Giesen 2006: 327 in Lowell Lewis 2013, p.131). Though many aspects of my performances include ritual-like aesthetics, it is not the sole methodology I use. Instead, iconographic performance is how I would define my methodology, using Lowell Lewis' phrase of "framing the extraordinary". In addition, his observation that "in general, the point here is that while the form of an event may be partially distinguished from its content, the two cannot be dissociated—that is, one cannot imagine a pure form without content or vice versa" (2013, p. 62), also aligns with my performance practice that seeks to distinguish the "pure form", or in my case, "tradition", that encompasses both sacred dance and Hindu ritual. My examples of how Chandralekha used similar methods to strip the classical Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam of all religiosity can also be described as transgressing tradition (2.2.3.Chandralekha, p.53 of this exegesis).

Lowell Lewis notes Turner's comparison to his (Turner's) work by the literary and social critic Mikhail Bakhtin, whose definition of "heteroglossia" (2013, p. 62) is a term that particularly resonates with my practice of iconography or iconised embodiment, and is equally characteristic of my work, which embodies multiple meanings, and cultural and religious hybrid representations and interpretations. In order to distinctly distinguish my iconographic performance practice from "imitation"

of traditional or Indian classical dance tropes, I find a similar affinity in his statement that "there is always an interplay between reproduction and adaptation or improvisation. As noted previously, any re-enactment is always partly a re-creation as well as a repetition, a process usually called *emergence*" (Lowell Lewis 2013, p.67). Graham St John's 2008 "Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance: An Introduction" , references this *emergence*, or *resurgence* particularly in the context of spirituality, religion or ritual in contemporary live art practice, that employs ritual or ritualised actions that cannot easily be analysed by anthropological definitions as debated by Turner (2001), Malinowski (on myth, ritual, and ethnography from 1922 to 1967), Van Gennep (1960) and Schechner (1985), but instead is driven more by "strategic narrative", (St. John 2008, p.10) :

The tragic *decline* of ritual (the sacred) remains a key intellectual investment, forming the necessary background to its *resurgence*—its heroic renewal in performance genres. For Turner, the depiction of modern secularization becomes a strategic narrative—a condition out of which the sacred (the authentic liminal) is rediscovered or relived. As he pointed out, "dis-membering may be a prelude to remembering" (1982c: 86). Graham St. John 2008, p.10.

Throughout this exegesis, and in this chapter, I use the term "ritualised actions," often in describing my work because even though they are of my own invention they draw on the Hindu dance temple traditions of Bharatanatyam and Odissi, of which I was a practitioner for three decades. In reference to Turner's comment above, I could also describe my methodology as "dis-membering " traditional concepts, by which I mean I have both literally dismantled and distilled aspects of

traditional dance forms, including ritual, while simultaneously drawing on memory and embodied knowledge to create my own mythological identities.

To further clarify the differences in my use of the word *tradition*, it is necessary to explain the different meanings of the term ritual *within* both Indian classical dance tradition, and Hindu iconographic tradition. For example I use the term "tradition" specifically in relation to Indian dance culture and religious and secular practices within Hindu tradition and culture.¹⁸ This is the source of my inspiration and reservoir of "sacred meanings" from which I extricate my own repertoire of performance language that includes ritual-like aesthetics. For example, my use of transforming "ritual dance" incorporates Indian classical dance *mudras* and classical or traditional Hindu invocatory dance that employs ancient sacred hymns and texts. Also characteristic of Indian classical dance modes is the use of repetition of dance sequences to add an element of expressive dynamic to the work. For example, in an Indian classical dance repertoire, certain dances use extended repetitious sequences called *sanchari* to allow the dancer to embody and express a single line of a song to be interpreted in several ways. These include first using the sentence translated by hand gestures alone, then slowly layering the

¹⁸ Lopez y Royo discusses the debates surrounding what she calls "A hyperreal temple ritual simulacrum" in her 2010 "Indian Classical Dance: A Sacred Art?" and argues that labeling Indian classical dance as "ancient" or sacred are attitudes that are nostalgic and stereotypical, and cites dance scholar Uttara Asha Coorlawala:

Invariably in the classical dance forms the "tradition" meant Hindu rituals, mythology and culture ...[As] a third century aesthetic was being nostalgically recovered and touted as the aesthetic of the dance of India, it resulted in confused confluences of Western ideologies with indigenous values'

(Coorlawala 1994:202 in Lopez y Royo 2010, p.116).

same line with rhythmic foot work, and increasing the speed and dynamics of the movement sequence till it reaches a crescendo. By drawing on these traditions, I isolate, manipulate, subvert, or invent movement that does not "copy" but rather interprets or transgresses traditional modes to explore and develop my performance vocabulary. Some of these "transgressed" iconographies and choreographies, for example, may depict violence, including self-decapitation or other sacrificial practices depicted in religious paintings, elaborated on in this chapter.

In Lowell Lewis' notes, his definition of "Iconic propagation" and "iconicity of style" (2013, p. 161), described the diverse patterns used in different cultural performances, and cites Antonin Artaud (1958), Roy Wagner (1972), and Clifford Geertz (1986), among others, in relation to "the paradox of repetition" (p.162), that also defines my use of ritual as a series of repetitious gestures or actions. This exegesis does not allow for an elaboration on liminality, or how the sacred (the authentic liminal) is rediscovered or relived. Instead, I list some of the main elements of Lowell Lewis' definitions that are relevant in my practice, by distinguishing "ritual" and "tradition" as terms used in this exegesis, by referencing his table of "Fundamental relations between special events (Performance) and everyday life" (p.76):

5. *Transformation*—special events in which an existing social situation is seen as problematic, needing to be brought into line with a more perfect, ideal, or desired social or cosmic order (Lowell Lewis 2013, Table 4.1, p. 76)

I have always defined the motivation and methodology of my work to be transformative, in other words, I address a certain element of traditional dance,

iconography, an artwork, or a specific social condition, in order to transform it using my own idiosyncratic performance vocabulary. In the context of this scholarly investigation, the transformative or transgressive elements used are specifically used in order to argue the validity of Kali iconography as feminist protest against predominantly Indian misogyny. Through my performance of *The Female Pope*, as one example, I *transform* patriarchal religious iconography that challenges traditional gender roles in society and religion, whilst the central theme of Kali iconography is one of reclaiming power or giving voice to cultural attitudes of female shame, a current issue that has led to current Indian misogynist violence, including rape and female infanticide.

6. *Linguistic tropes*—a residual category that includes the many sorts of relations found in genres like European theater and other classical types (Chinese Opera, Indian Kathakali, Javanese Wayang, Japanese Noh), which have complex linguistic patterning central to the performative events. In these cases, such devices as irony, satire, critique, and ambiguity create multivocal relations with everyday activities, using specific tropes like metaphor, metonymy, and the like.

(Lowell Lewis 2013, p.76).

In reference to the quote above, performing iconography in the context of analysing my practice is a form of "linguistic trope", with my exaggerated use of metaphors in my choreography of iconised performance installations. Examples of these "performed metaphors" are listed in Chapter Three's description of Kali iconographies and how I have subverted or transformed them in my durational performances. Additionally, my use of hybrid religious iconography in *Kali Madonna* (2014), and the new creative work *Urban Kali* (2017) are examples of

works that were made with the intention of creating ambiguity and multiple meanings.

Throughout the exegesis, I also describe ritual as a form of methodology used specifically by contemporary performance artists, in order to describe my precedents of practice, and as described by Marsh (2014). The debates and contentious use of the over-used and overburdened meaning of "ritual" in contemporary performance can be debated endlessly, but in the context of this scholarly examination and self-reflexive critique of my practice, I can perhaps further define it by describing it as a respectful and lengthy process of the *appropriation of sacred concepts* in order to create *secular performance*, which frames this scholarly research project. By making work that engages with socially aware, feminist performance activism, my invention of appropriated religious iconographic performances are enactments or evocations that critique real world situations, namely Indian misogyny, in relation to similar global situations.

The artists investigated in this chapter are referenced mainly in relation to ritual as a means of *transgressing tradition* in order to reshape or manipulate ideas. The progression and development of performance art in the context of ritual as a performance practice is discussed in Marsh's *Body and Self* (1993). Marsh (b. 1956) is best known for her survey of Australian performance art since the sixties and seventies. In particular, her chapter "Body art, shamanism and Western ritual" in *Body and Self* (1993, p.96) discusses the concept of sacrifice as a transgressive act, which has been particularly helpful to my thinking. Marsh observes that artists who use ritualistic embodiments can develop a narcissistic, obsessive relationship with their own bodies that are sometimes mistakenly interpreted as a combination

of the ego and the artist's personality. She suggests, however, that what is being seen is rather a representation of a "split-subject", a subject in crisis. Thus "The crisis that the subject experiences, is brought about by what is rejected, denied, and forgotten in western culture" (p.96). As Marsh observes, many live art practitioners who began working in a cathartic, obsessive manner, have used extreme violence on their own bodies in order to exorcise loss, anger, shame, and have performed rituals in durational forms of performance that offered a sense of release or liberation (1993, p.p.96-97). Some early examples of Australian performance artists cited by Marsh are Mike Parr (b. 1945) and Stelarc, (b. 1946) who shared the belief in performance as catharsis by inflicting pain and violence through extreme methods. These ritualised interpretations of performance protest, are described by Marsh as a predictable characteristic of performance art in the seventies, which was aimed at dismantling notions of social taboo and "conventional myths" (1993, p.99). Marsh's description of the "crisis" experienced in durational work is not debated (in this exegesis) in relation to Turner and Van Gennep's theories of anthropological approaches to culture and performance. My intention is to align her descriptions of "liberation and release" in durational performance, which is also a concept in Indian classical dance culture, to my current contemporary performance practice.¹⁹ I also intentionally avoid descriptions

¹⁹ The concept of *moksha*, the Hindu concept of freedom/release from rebirth, or liberation, is another traditional Hindu concept that is inherent in all forms of the Indian classical dance forms. This exegesis does not allow for further elaboration on this concept, as it is a dense subject that has been addressed endlessly by scholars for years. The awakening of the sense of the sacred has been described as a form of release, often brought about through the aid of powerful drugs, exemplified by Aldous Huxley's 1999 *Moksha: Aldous Huxley's Classic Writings on Psychedelics and the Visionary Experience*, and more recently in academia by R C Mishra's 2013 "Moksha and the Hindu Worldview".

such as *cathartic* or *healing* in the context of describing my practice, as they are also over-burdened and misleading terms. Instead my interests are more aligned with the relationship between ritual practices in contemporary live art performance.

Most recently Marsh has written more extensively on the relationship between live performance, ritual and documentation. Her 2014 publication, *performance_ritual_document*, is another key source for this enquiry. Given my engagement with intercultural performance as both feminist and activist practice, Marsh's compelling description of Iranian-born Nasim Nasr's video work *Erasure* (2010) provides a resonant parallel with my own interests. Based on memories of her youth in Iran, and under the oppressive patriarchal rule of the country, Nasr's performance is driven by the use of the black *chador* (the full semi-circular garment used by Muslim women that covers the entire body, and part or all of the face). The *chador* is stretched out in the shape of a large fan and used as a surface for writing text in chalk. Nasr uses the poetry of Iranian feminist, Forugh Farrokhzad, in both Farsi and English, which is then erased and crossed through, until the words are indecipherable, leaving only a powdery residue as a metaphor for those female histories that are constantly erased (Marsh 2014, p.147). The use of the *chador* as a tactile material symbolising "erasure" of the feminine resonates with my own ritualistic use of the sari, veils, and body markings in referencing sacred concepts in secular performance. Such performance ritual may be sourced from traditional or religious practices.

For example, religious studies scholar Catherine Bell's 's summations on the diverse definitions and practical articulations of religious ritual echoes my own

employment of ritual in dance performances dating back to the early nineties. Ritual became a method for my work which developed through the deconstruction and reimagining of traditional Indian dance, in order to explore an intercultural dialogue in dance. Most crucially, it provided me with a foundation for investigating socially aware performance that focused on Indian misogyny. As Bell relates,

The ritualised social body, therefore, is one that comes to possess, to various degrees, a cultural "sense of ritual." It is necessary to explore the practical workings of this sense of ritual in order to come to any conclusions about the distinctiveness of ritualisation as practice.

Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (Bell 1992, p.107).

Bell's extensive study of theoretical and technical approaches to ritual in numerous contexts, are also examined in detail in *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997). In this work, she cites the scholarship of anthropologist Nancy Munn in reference to ritual as "a symbolic system of codes", describing it as "a symbolic intercom between the level of cultural thought and complex cultural meanings, on the one hand, and that of social action and the immediate event, on the other". Munn and Bell suggest that the codes and systems that define ritual action are based on the participants' own lived or bodily experience, and that categories are drawn from sets of experiences within pluralistic societies. The social pluralisms that rituals address might pertain to the inclusion or exclusion of diverse peoples, deities, and culture (Bell 1997, citing Munn, p.66).

Ritual, as explained by Bell, can manipulate cultural codes, and preconceived notions by employing "patterns of opposition". By this expression, she offers

examples of "human versus the divine", "male versus female", or assumptions that are inscribed in many cultures, within the social body, for example women as weak, or god as dangerous (1997, p.66). Bell's comments on how ritual "synthesises the conceptual" and can seem to resolve or evoke ideas simultaneously (1997, p. 80), are also important in defining my own practice of performing Kali iconography as feminist performance activism. The concept of sacrifice, which features in many Tantric Hindu iconographies related to Kali are also discussed below, in the context of European performance artists who use violence as ritual performance.

The present research has included Middle Eastern feminist artists relevant to this investigation but has not elaborated on them in more detailed analysis of "other" cultural influences. These intersections of research and practice, where tradition and culture are inexorably enmeshed, include artists/activists Shirin Neshat (born 1957, Iran), Mona Hartoum (born 1952, Lebanon), and Sukran Moral (born 1962, Turkey). These artists often use religious or political symbolism to create socially aware performance art as a form of protest against political oppression. Using subjects (such as the nude female body) that are considered taboo in their culture, they present their bodies as sites for their art, often integrating film/video and art installation, to present powerful feminist works.

The artists to be discussed, firstly, include the dynamic and subversive Indian choreographer, activist, and feminist, Chandralekha (b. 1928 - 2006), who manipulated the structures of sacred dance into contextually secular interpretation, thereby subverting and transcending traditional concepts to create a contemporary

performance vocabulary. She paved the way for women artists like myself, who have emerged from the heritage of Bharatanatyam Indian classical dance. The next section describes Chandralekha's influence in contemporary Indian dance, as well as the internationally celebrated German dance artist, Pina Bausch (1940-2009), a contemporary and admirer of Chandralekha's work.²⁰ Like Chandralekha, Bausch used classically trained dancers to explore themes that challenged the conventions of classical dance. Arguably both Bausch and Chandralekha's search for new directions and social attitudes through dance was undertaken in "direct proportion to the violence of our times" (Bharucha 1995, p.339). In the context of Chandralekha's work, the violence of the era was the nationalist movement in post-Independent India (1947 onwards), that objected to any reforms that could be seen as subversive or contradictory to nationalistic, Hindu values.

4.1. Chandralekha: Reclaiming *Shakti* or female power)

Rustom Bharucha's *Chandralekha: Woman Dance Resistance* (1995) explains how Chandralekha angered purists by abandoning all religiosity of Bharatanatyam dance traditions, which she felt was shaped by national, patriarchal rules, and instead celebrated the human body, in particular the power of the female (*Shakti*), by drawing on erotic, explicit temple sculptures. Bharucha's observations on the connection between cultural performativity and performance as protest are relevant to the concept of tradition as transgression, by exemplifying the life and work of this

²⁰ At the same time during my years as director of *Kalika Dance Company*, I was invited as guest artist in other Australian and International director's works, further exposing me to Western dance theatre practices. Through these experiences, I was also exposed to the influence of the work of Bausch. Irish theatre director Jim Hughes (*Fieldworks Company* 1988-1996) introduced a style of physical theatre to Perth that was influenced by Bausch, and subsequently impacted on the development of the performance practice of many Australian artists, including my own.

legendary choreographer, dancer and activist. He was fortunate in his close association with Chandralekha over many years till her passing in 2006, often touring with her company, whilst giving him a unique insight into her personal life. Most relevant to this thesis is his explanation of her use of Hindu Goddess iconography, suggesting that the "fundamentalist appropriation of militant images of goddesses" is important for secular artists to source sacred images for creative purposes, and as a form of artistic protest. This representation, says Bharucha, is not "a replica of an icon, but a personally investigated representation, strongly driven by the personality of the artist" (Bharucha 1995, p.164). His description aptly describes my own use of Hindu goddess iconography as both artistic feminist protest, and as the product of my many years of dance research.

Chandralekha's strong personality as woman and performer is evident in all her work, as seen in an Indian Television Interview, *Talking Heads* (2000). Her compelling voice and personality can be witnessed when she spoke to Sunil Sethi, about how she rebelled against the expectations and impact of the "male gaze" in (Indian classical) dance. In another, with Richard Tremblay in *Interview with Choreographer Chandralekha* (Montréal, 1997), she describes the energy generated within the dancer's body as seeking to infuse the audience, so that they too, connect with and provoke consciousness within their bodies. This "transferable energy" between audience and dancer evokes a sense of renewal, one that energises both, through the expelling of breath. Dance makes one radiant, like the

flow of air or water; she says, "The whole body becomes vibrant, and *this* is the true meaning of dance" (Chandralekha, 1997).²¹

What interested me most about this interview was Chandralekha's passionate view on the transference of energy in dance, a view I share specifically in my current practice of performance art, where many of my performance installations involve audience interaction through silent communication. In addition, Chandralekha asked herself these questions when she commenced dancing and creating work: What is the relation of the (female) body to society? What is the relation of the female body to the audience? In questioning my own practice, I would also enquire, what is the relation of the *intercultural* female body in a predominantly western society? The next section draws on comparisons between Chandralekha and Pina Bausch's pioneering work in addressing the female role in dance performance.

4.1.1. Performing female identity: Chandralekha and Pina Bausch

Chandralekha's legacy in dance lives on today, as I witnessed on a recent trip to Chennai, India (Dec 2016-Jan 2017),²² when I attended a performance of her company on the tenth anniversary of her death in 2006. Performed by an ensemble of mainly female dancers, the work *Sri* brought to life Chandralekha's choreography.

²¹ Both interviews of Chandralekha that are cited are listed in the "Miscellaneous: Sound and Visual" section of the Bibliography.

²² Over three weeks in Dec 2016 and Jan 2017, I attended daily performances at the prestigious Indian classical dance festival at the Music Academy in Chennai, attending predominantly Bharatanatyam dance recitals, both solo and ensemble works, in order to revisit my own dance heritage. I also revisited *Nrityagram* (the Dance Village), where I studied Odissi in 1991 onwards under my Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra (1926-2004), and where I have frequently returned since then. My trip included visiting and attending performances at the Theosophical Society Chennai, which was home to Rukmini Devi, and is still a venue that showcases her repertoire in dance and theatre.

Bharucha describes the work, observing that *Sri* "provides some flashes of insight into the pre-history of women, a vibrant matriarchy in which women are viewed in a state of resplendent grace and strength" (1995, p.308). He also describes her ability to "represent the militancy of women without denying them their sensuality" (p.309). I found his use of the term "militancy" to be an appropriate description of the aesthetic in the performance that I witnessed.

My observation of the performance was not only of the opposing stark yet sensual aspects of the choreography, but also the ritualistic structures of the formations of the dancers on stage. The groups of women in linear clusters reminded me of military formations, giving an impression of a collective body of female warriors poised for battle. The dancers moved to a minimal sound beat of two pebbles struck together, instead of the tradition of using the stick (phallic =dominant male) and wooden block (passive= female) to keep *talam*, or rhythmic time-beats, which Chandralekha felt represented patriarchal control of the form.²³ The mesmerising austerity and simplicity of the rhythmic striking of stones exaggerated the intensity of the dancers' movements. The shapes and sounds of bodies falling or stamping on the earth, their focus and movements in solitary trajectories or as banded groups moving silently and vigorously, heightened the tension and physicality of the piece. Often, the dancers' seemingly combative stances, drawn from the Indian martial arts tradition of *Kalariyapattu*²⁴ are

²³ The *Tattupalakai* (wooden block= passive female object) and *Tattukazhi* (stick = active male object) is a dance training tradition initiated by mostly male teachers of the form. Chandralekha made a point of rejecting what she saw as a patriarchal shaping of Bharatanatyam, and the stark soundscape as used in *Sri* was another act of defiance against the 'establishment' of classical dance purists, including the use of female -only percussionists.

²⁴ *Kalariyapattu* is the indigenous martial art of Kerala and has been practiced for more than five hundred years, even though it is a centuries old form. The martial training aims at the overall development of an individual, beginning from physical strength, mental balance and progressing to

contrasted with the sensual floor work. At times a dancer would separate from a line of low moving, gliding, or marching configuration to break abruptly into a series of deep lunges to the floor. At other times, a lone dancer, central and downstage, moved in a meditative sequence of unfolding and coiling, framed by the formations of lines, semi-circles and diagonals of the ensemble. The slow, sharp echoes of the pebbles striking in rhythm continued throughout, in total contrast to the large classical dance orchestras used in most Indian Classical dance traditions, and exemplifies Chandralekha's methods of transgressing tradition.

Another example of Chandralekha's aesthetic of "stripping back", or subverting traditions was by rejecting the use of traditional embellishments of costumes and jewellery. The dancers (in the work I witnessed as well as in past dance repertoire) were dressed in simple cotton saris worn short (below the knees) over cotton pants, the usual attire worn for dance practice. Unadorned and devoid of make-up or even foot dance-bells, the emphasis was concentrated on the body within the work. Another interesting aspect of this mainly female ensemble was the diversity of training that was evident in the dancers' bodies. Among the dancers were western dancers, demonstrating the non-discrimination of her choreography, which I saw as a powerful synthesis of Indian classical dance, yoga, and martial arts. Various elements of Indian martial arts and yoga have also been incorporated into my contemporary dance repertoire. My training in Odissi involved learning several exercises from the Indian martial art form of *Chau*, and was consequently incorporated into my dance repertoire in the past. In 2008 I collaborated with

spiritual awareness (Shaji K John, 2011,p.x). Many Indian classical dancers, including myself, have incorporated various Indian martial arts forms into dance choreography, and many dance exercises are drawn from these traditions. During an *Asialink* artist residency in 2007 in Pondicherry, at the Adi Shakti Theatre over two months, I studied the basics of Kalaripayattu as a daily morning warm up.

dancer Kenny Feather in my work *Disturbing Elements* and *Calcutta Underground* (2009), which incorporated Tai-chi martial arts (in which he is trained) with Indian dance motifs and western dance forms. My collaborations with western trained dancers, choreographers and musicians as well as other visual artists is now a routine practice as part of intercultural performance, and not exceptional, as it may have been in Chandralekha's time, when innovation and feminist activism was viewed with scepticism or disapproval. She also interacted with and exposed her dancers to western dance methods. In particular, Chandralekha's dance production *Yantra* (1994), which she described as "a vocabulary of inwardness", was a tribute to Pina Bausch's work *Nelken* (Bharucha 1995, p. 338).²⁵

4.1.2. Pina Bausch (1940-2009)

Chandralekha enjoyed a strong connection with Pina Bausch, ever since their first meeting in 1988, and subsequent years when they each performed alternatively in Germany and India. Pina Bausch (b. Solingen, Germany) was an extraordinary pioneer of a form of dance theatre that has had a major influence on western contemporary dance theatre. Both artists, Bausch and Chandralekha, were driven to create work in response to the depressing state of global politics, but both came from distinctly different perspectives. Bausch's eclectic approach, grounded in classical ballet, included expressionism, absurdity and parody, often framed by scenarios of violence. Bausch also explored the paradoxical extremities between brutality and tenderness, vulnerability and strengths (Bharucha 1995, p.339).

²⁵ My own 1997 work *Yantra* (*The Quarry*, Perth, WA) with my nine-member company *Kalika Dance* was also based on the sacred Hindu diagrams, and included a cross cultural dance vocabulary that extended to the orchestra of classical Indian and Australian musicians.

Siri Hustvedt's film essay "*Pina: Dancing for Dance*" (2011) describes the German documentary film *Pina*, which relates how Bausch was actively involved with the Wim Wenders-directed film until her sudden death in 2009. Two years later, the film was completed as a tribute to her, in collaboration with her dancers. Hustvedt observes that:

Bausch's dance forms are reminiscent of dreams, and by their nature, dreams are more emotional than waking life. The choreographer exploits their mysterious vocabulary in her work to achieve insights into the affective, often erotic, and destructive, pulse of human desire (Hustvedt, 2013).



Fig.28. Pina Bausch and Chandralekha, "Hammoniale Festival of Women", 1995 (<https://evamattes.com/liederabende/hammoniale-festival-der-frauen/>).

Lucy Weir's 2014 essay, "Audience manipulation? Subverting the fourth wall in Pina Bausch's *Kontakthof* (1978) and *Nelken* (1982)" is a discussion of Bausch's methodology, and the critical writings on her work, many of which attempt to analyse their gendered, cultural and political underpinnings, "...the line between humour and tragedy or violence is often very thin, and the dancers transgress the audience's expectations not only of appropriate comic or dramatic performance, but also of the physical boundaries of the stage itself ". This transgression of boundaries is often referred to as the "fourth wall", or the barrier that separates audience from performer" (Weir 2014, pp.21-22). Bausch's approach was to repeatedly dismantle and reinstate this barrier throughout her lengthy works, thus engaging the audience in a play of spectator and participant at unpredictable moments. Her portrayal of relationships, violence and pathos challenged the stereotypical roles that women played in traditional contemporary dance theatre. Similarly, by rejecting the patriarchal control over classical Indian dance repertoire that characteristically portrayed the feminine as the subservient, pining heroine. Chandralekha instead celebrated feminine eroticism and *Shakti* (female power) by creating a dance repertoire that protested female shame and what she called the "State's governing of the body" (Bharucha 1995, p.339).

Another aspect of her work that resonates with my own practice is that though she embraced the structures and framework of a classical dance tradition, she assumed the right to interpret it according to the requirements of her practice. Similarly, I have assumed "permission" to use Kali iconography as a valid and ideal vehicle for expression and performance, and critically, as an ideal icon for female

protest. In addition, I have avoided choreographing repertoire that reinforced the conventional rules of both western and eastern dance theatre that often places the female in the role of the "anguished heroine", in an endless search of her male counterpart.²⁶



Fig.29. Rakini Devi's *Kali Yuga*, Lennox Theatre, Parramatta, image by Heidrun Löhr, 2004.

4.2. Redefining the Feminine

The cultural stereotyping, most specifically of non-European artists in contemporary performance, is another platform of artistic protest in my work. The cultural stereotypes imposed on non-European artists and the preconceived notions on the subject of their art was a strong motivation for the first decade of my contemporary dance practice, where I sought to dismantle these perceptions of the non-western "Other". Like Cuban-American interdisciplinary performance artist Coco Fusco (b.1960), I have sought to suggest just how stifling these cultural

²⁶ The research on choreography and the female in western dance was drawn from many sources that are impossible to expand upon in this thesis, but include Ann Cooper Albright's *Engaging Bodies: The Politics and Poetics of Corporeality* (2013), Sharon Friedler and Susan Glazer's *Dancing Female* (2014) and others listed in the bibliography.

stereotypes can be, through many of my performances.²⁷ As Fusco writes, "What may be [liberating] and [transgressive] identification for Europeans and Euro-Americans, is already a symbol of entrapment within an imposed stereotype for "[Others]" (Fusco, 1995 p.46). Bharucha has also accounted for the effects of misinformation in the cultural stereotyping of non-European art practices. In his chapter "Collision of Culture" in *Theatre and the World* (1984, pp. 13-41) he suggests that contemporary intercultural theatre is the culmination of a disparate exchange of ideas between eastern and western cultures. Due to the affluence of the west, it is westerners who have thus initiated and controlled "exchange", taking advantage of the poverty of Third World artists by exploiting their art, circumscribing sacred rituals and traditional performances through technological documentation, and misrepresenting non-European theatre.

Bharucha raises concerns regarding the exploitative "celebration" of other cultures, as advocated by Schechner (1985), arguing that it is not enriching for the cultures borrowed from, and instead represents an extension of colonialism. This imbalance of power has led to the exploitation of ancient cultural traditions, with the exploited having neither the means nor political power to redress the situation. It is only in recent years that intercultural practitioners have found a voice, which, in Bharucha's opinion is a voice few are willing to listen to, having been already prescribed by decades of western-influenced theatre practices and methodologies (1984, p.37).

²⁷ For example, my work *Claustrophobia* (Perth Fringe Festival 2001 & *Kei Takaie's dance Theatre*, Tokyo 2001,) was drawn on the concept of being bound or inhibited within cultural stereotypes of both artistic practice and as a non-European woman.

These concerns underpinned my early motivation for creating intercultural performance, which sought to challenge or redress these ambiguous appreciations of "other" cultures, and in particular the western cultural appropriation of Indian traditions. This next section focuses on key women artists who have dismantled female stereotypes by staging multifaceted or alternative aspects of female identity by challenging stereotypical representations of women.

It is worth noting that from the sixties onwards, many women artists chose to work in performance art precisely because it challenged modernist notions of painting and sculpture as "heroic" activities primarily carried out by men. One such example is the American artist Carolee Schneemann (b.1939 Ohio, USA), a pioneer of performance and video art, who infamously used her body in live and pre-recorded performances that challenged social and cultural norms, and subverted female stereotypes. Schneemann's work centres on female sexuality, and its transformative aspects, which she describes in *Imaging Her Erotics* (2002). In a discussion of her early works, and in particular her *Eye Body - 36 Transformative Actions* (1963) Schneemann writes, "The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring, and yet still be votive- marked and written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will" (Schneemann 2002, p.55). She explores the idea of how a woman artist could be simultaneously the image and the image-maker. Iconography and instrumentality were the 'two structured poles' in her methodology, whereby the sense of the body is as an instrument, and the investigation of that instrument of "available sensation" was instigated throughout her work (2002, p.52).

More than forty years later, Schneeman's work is still relevant. During an interview relating to her retrospective exhibition *Kinetic Painting* (2018) in MoMa, New York, she comments on why her work is still being discussed. In an interview by Alexandra Juhasz in "The Ms. Q&A: Feminist Artist Carolee Schneeman Looks Backward and Forward" (2018), she says:

Well, the larger questions that have always been central to my work—about gender, ecology, and militarism—have increased in our world. They are bigger, and more monstrous, and more suppressive, and also more diverted in this culture of consumerism and confusion.

Schneemann emphasises how politics influence art, in particular feminist art, commenting that "Today, underneath everything, there's this vicious, crazed, hyper-masculine reactionary stance: an underlying monstrosity that brought us to the political position that we are in today" (Juhasz, 2018). The interviewer's observation that misogyny still prevails today, validates the pioneering feminist artistic practices of the early seventies and eighties. For example, the misogynist beliefs that lingered in the male-dominated world of art in the early seventies and eighties inspired other western artists like Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) to challenge female stereotypes. Her highly provocative archetypical females, as seen in *Untitled Film Stills*, a series of sixty-nine black-and-white photographs were created between 1977 and 1980. These images of her self-portraiture are considered some of the most original and inspiring examples of feminist iconography.

Based on popular culture and stereotypical film roles for women, Sherman's photographic work using herself as the subject of imaginary identities resonates with the challenges faced by many women artists to examine their own identities in a predominantly patriarchal culture. As curator Paul Moorhouse has written of

Sherman, many feminist theorists have debated Sherman's creative process in which she positions herself as artist and subject. He observes that her work, characteristically fictional, and laden with "overt artifice", bridges the gap between exterior representations of life and the human desire to comprehend the core of existence (Moorhouse, 2000 p.11). Sherman's method of creating performance personas in order to address notions of female identity meshes with my own practice of using the body as the site of "performed iconographies".²⁸

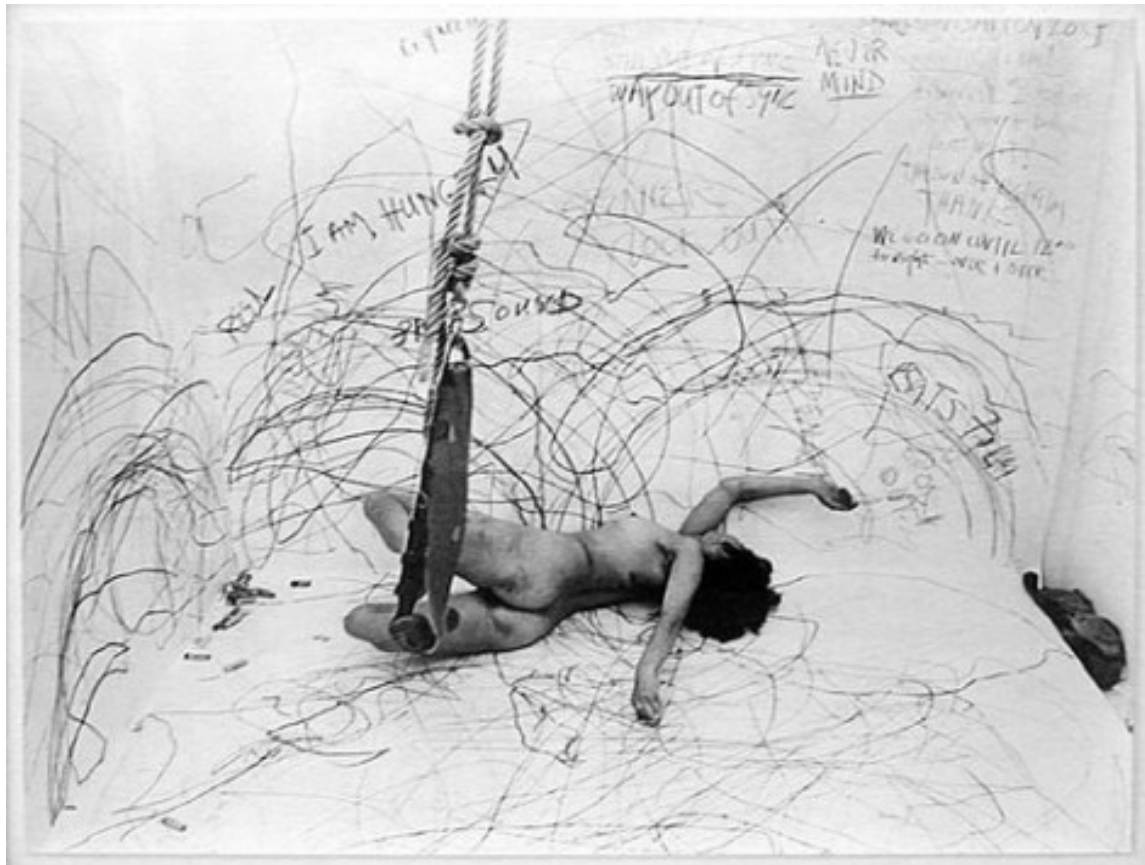


Fig. 30. *Up to and Including Her Limits*, Carolee Schneemann, (1973-76. Crayon on paper, rope, and harness), MOMA.

²⁸ Sherman herself is said to disregard many feminist theories and other analyses of her work. In response to the publication of *The Complete Untitled Film Stills* (2003), she claimed that her inspiration came from black and white cinema, and not from her knowledge of feminist theory (Moorhouse 2003, p.10).

These performed iconographies and self-portraits may also describe my own creation of iconic female personas in order to address feminist protest as performance. Some examples include *Calcutta Manga* (2001-2003), with a persona based on my experiences in Japan and inspired by Japanese anime and graphic novels, *The Bandit Queen* (2004) based on the female bandit Phoolan Devi, *The Virtual Goddess* (1998-2003), a self-mythologised "oracle" that satirised New Age religious and cultural appropriation of Tantric Hinduism, *The Widow* (2006-2010), based on my experiences in Spain and the Spanish Catholic cult of "The Widows of Christ" and *The Female Pope* (2010 ongoing), *Kali Madonna* (2014 ongoing), and *Kali the Black Madonna* (2014 ongoing). The new creative work *Urban Kali* distills these previous personas into the Bengali iconography of Kali.

In creating diverse performance personas, including, for example *The Female Pope*, I identify the predominantly patriarchal Christian ritual persona of the Pope, and subvert this image with that of a culturally hybrid female pope, a concept drawn on the myth of Pope Joan,²⁹ and a synthesis of Kali and the Black Madonna. The concept of patriarchal religious roles are parallel to Hindu traditions that relocated women from positions of religious and mythical power to that of mere consorts or "wives" to heroes and male deities.

²⁹ The most well-known and influential version of the female pope story, however, comes from the *Chronicon pontificum et imperatorum* (Chronicle of Popes and Emperors), written by the Dominican Friar Martinus Polonus. Due to the prestige and credibility derived from his ties with the Roman hierarchy, Martinus' work circulated widely, and overshadowed the accounts of earlier writers on the same subject. Unlike other earlier accounts, Martinus provides a vivid account of the female pope's life (Rustici 2006). Another author who traces the myth of Pope Joan is Alain Boureau, in his book *The Myth of Pope Joan* (2001).

In Craig M. Rustici's *The Afterlife of Pope Joan: Deploying the Popess Legend in Early Modern England* (2006), he examines and debates fifteenth century historical records and disputes (from the Catholic Church) regarding her existence. He discusses the life of Pope Joan, at the same time critiquing the (1972) film portrayal of her as not actually transgressive, but conservative.³⁰ Even in legends and paintings, her undoing became her act of giving birth during a ceremony, having shamefully concealed her sex and pregnancy. Thus;

The act of subversion recounted in the popess legend is relatively modest, effected as it is, through disguise, rather than open defiance of patriarchal institutions, and ultimately undone, as Joan's untimely parturition suggests, by a woman's unruly body (Rustici 2006, p.157).

In concurring with his observation, my own development of the *Female Pope* took place in my first European performance debut of a potentially sacrilegious character. The concept was initiated through an invitation in 2010 (from Festival co-curator, Swedish Butoh dancer SUEN) to open the *Friction International Live Art Festival*, (whose theme was Spirituality in Art), in Uppsala, Sweden. The venue was the magnificent thirteenth century Gothic Uppsala Cathedral. The Cathedral is also the seat of the Archbishop of Uppsala, of the Lutheran Church of Sweden. The magnificence of the cathedral, designed in the French Gothic style, is the tallest of Protestant Nordic cathedrals. The towering splendour of the high altar, directly below the opulent nave, was the setting for my first "unveiling" of *The*

³⁰ In 2009, another movie *Pope Joan* was released.

Female Pope. Seated on a "throne," the architectural grandeur of the cathedral imbued the imagery of this iconic persona with a dignity and solemnity that would be and has been impossible to recreate or surpass in other non-religious spaces.³¹ The performance was received with a respect given to religious figures or icons, with the audience seated or kneeling in silence for over an hour. It was later presented again at the *Uppsala Art Museum* in a gallery as *An Audience With The Female Pope*,³² which was an interactive durational work. The Christian depiction of the *pietà*, a concept used often by many performance artists inspired by Christian history and iconography, required the collaboration of a "Jesus". Japanese artist, Makoto Maruyama was delegated this role, but due to his extreme exhaustion from jetlag, he lay at my feet rather than in my arms. The image of the "Body of Christ" at my feet in the role of Pope, as I sat erect, veiled in black with the markings of Kali, and crowned by a black leather mitre, gave rise to many interpretations. The intention of this first performance of *The Female Pope* was to explore audience reactions to a culturally hybrid, religious figure, and to experience and challenge my own performance design and practice.

³¹ There was a huge presence of priests and ecclesiastical ordinaries and staff in the cathedral at all times. Surrounded by this visual and physical presence of Christian patriarchal splendor, I had the added 'honour' of dressing for the performance in one of the vestries, where, in adjoining rooms, high up above the Church, were long rows of priests' cassocks in purple and red. The curators informed me that the priest in charge of dispensing permission for the festival was initially wary of my opening performance installation. However, the wording of the title that offered a vague fusion of Indian Goddess/saint reassured him. I was informed later that the priests were more than satisfied with the performance, proven by my observation of one or two of the priests taking a few photos during my performance from behind pillars.

³² As an interactive durational work, *An Audience with The Female Pope* was also performed in Helsinki (2010), (Sydney 2013) and New York (2014).



Fig.31. Rakini Devi and Makoto Maruyama, *The Female Pope*, *Friction International Live Art Festival*, Uppsala Cathedral, Sweden, Image by Gunnar H Stening, 2010.

The work was described in the Friction Festival catalogue as follows:

Rakini Devi allows the Indian Goddess Kali to adopt the guise of Johanna, a mystical female Pope ... The role is created by costume, body paint, posture and description. The same figure appeared in the Cathedral as the lamenting Virgin Mary with the body of Christ. The piece challenges our conceptions of religion, culture and gender. The papal splendour is convincing.

(Kurt Wolmar Nyberg, *Friction* catalogue, 2010).

Nyberg continued by describing the interactive performance of *Audience with The Female Pope* (Fig. 32), in the Uppsala Art Museum: "The audience is invited to partake in a role-play. Some sit awaiting audience on a long bench in front of the Pope's throne. It starts when the Pope eyes the visitor and ends when she averts her gaze. Relationships are visualized in the room through the processes of

waiting, encounter, and conclusion. A focal point and a time gauge are created between the gazes" (Nyberg, 2010).



Fig. 32. *An Audience with The Female Pope*, Uppsala Art Museum, *Friction International Live art Festival*, Image by Gunnar H Stening, 2010.

In the context of my interest and practice of transgressive and transgressing female religious iconography, drawing on medieval European Christian art, both Sherman and Orlan have depicted their versions of iconography of the breast-revealing Madonna, as seen in Fig 32 and 33. As two examples of pure frisson of "tradition transgressed", the power of both images emanate a sense of bodily blasphemy, yet, by situating themselves in the classical framework of costume and style, they align notions of sacred and secular. Similarly, the formal setting of the "enthroned" female pope in my work is aesthetically disruptive of tradition, when situated in an archbishop's cathedral. By reimagining the female pope, I attempt to

dispute the ambivalence and prejudice surrounding gender in both secular and religious contexts.



33. Cindy Sherman *Untitled #216*, 1989 Chromogenic colour print in Paul Moorhouse's *Cindy Sherman*, (2014, p.86). Fig.

Fig. 34. Plate 1. *The Assumption of Saint Orlan on Video Monitor*, 1983 photo by Jean-Paul Lefret in C. Jill O'Bryan's *Carnal Art*, 2005.

4.3. Violence as Ritual Performance

Introduction

Though this chapter is about how violence, specifically depicted in contemporary performance art is used as a means of protest, or form of performance activism, my own use of iconographic or metaphoric performances that reference violence have their roots in a far more complex source, that is inevitably linked to ethnic violence, and the "theatre of the body" as elaborated upon in Arjun Appadurai's 1998 "Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization". Though Appadurai investigates the nature and causes of ethnic violence, they resonated with my research of misogynist atrocities. Appadurai explains how ethnocidal violence is not only based upon ignorance of the "other", but a far more compelling uncertainty of the ethnic self.

They arise in circumstances where the lived experience of large labels becomes unstable, indeterminate, and socially volatile, so that violent action can become one means of satisfying one's sense of one's categorical self. But of course the violent epistemology of bodily violence, the "theater of the body" on which this violence is performed, is never truly cathartic, satisfying, or terminal. It only leads to a deepening of social wounds, an epidemic of shame, a collusion of silence, and a violent need for forgetting.

(Appadurai 1998, p.244)

Whether "performing violence " is cathartic, or satisfying is not under debate. For many artists, performing durational work that depicts violence or audience participation in simulated acts of violence, have become characteristic of performance art. These performed "ritual actions" of violence are in many cases

performed in order to explore deeper understandings of both culture, society, and the nature of violence itself upon the human condition. The use of animal carcasses and blood is also characteristic of many performance artists to explore themes of taboo. Imogen Elliot reviews Hermann Nitsch's *150. Action* at 2017 *Dark Mofo Festival* in Hobart,

The forcible act of flooding a naked human body with animal blood is a creative interpretation of the endemic violence of humanity, and an inherent hunger to sadistically assert dominance and power (Elliot, in *The Advocate*, June 19, 2017).

33

These concepts of the play between dominance and power are also motivations used in my contrasting iconographies of Madonna and Kali, as conflicting and even dangerous representations, consequently drawing me to research women artists who have used violence upon their own bodies through "ritual actions", signifying my own connection to the violence of Kali iconography, as protest against misogynist atrocities in **all** cultures.

The violence depicted in Kali iconography that I use in performance as a form of ritual, was discussed in Chapter Three, and connects to the exegetical examination of those contemporary artists who perform violence as ritual, or whose works evoked protest. For example, Japanese born Yoko Ono (b. 1933) and Serbian born Marina Abramović (b. 1946), are both artists now based in America who employed confrontational and often violent imagery in their performances. Yoko

³³ In 2017 *Dark Mofo Festival* in Hobart, I attended *150. Action* by Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch, a durational work promoted as a "bloody sacrificial ritual," that received mixed reviews from audiences. Naked performers bound to crosses were fed blood and bull -semen from a decapitated bull carcass, in a series of solemn ritual "actions" that were supposed to be 150 in number, and listed in a written score, often accompanied by live or recorded sound.

Ono explored the concept of placing the female body in a vulnerable, almost sacrificial form in *Cut Piece*, (Kyoto 1964). Audiences were invited to cut her garments off her body with a large pair of scissors. Kristine Stiles and Midori Yoshimoto in Munroe and Hendricks (eds) in *Yes; Yoko Ono* (2000), described this work: "*Cut Piece* exposed the voluntary and incisive potential of the gaze to puncture and wound, to cut away at that which is observed" (Stiles & Midori 2000, p.158). By subverting the historical image of women as passive objects of beauty and desire, these performance modes ushered in a new era of experimentation for women artists, and encouraged the solo art form for women. Though Ono herself writes that her inspiration for *Cut Piece* was the renunciation of the Buddha, who sacrificed his body for enlightenment, many performance artists, both male and female, have adapted this work to address a range of issues through ritualised actions. Kevin Concannon in "Yoko Ono, From Text to Performance and Back again" (2008), suggests:

When addressing serious issues – in this case voyeurism, sexual aggression, gender subordination, violation of a woman's personal space, and violence against women – Ono invariably found means to combine dangerous confrontation with poetry, spirituality, personal vulnerability, and edgy laughter (Concannon 2008, pp. 81-93).

Drawing on this now iconic work (*Cut Piece*) as inspiration, my 2013 performance *The Punishment of Pope Joan* (Melbourne, *Club 86*) consisted of a series of ritualised movements, in other words, a choreographed sequence of gestures that incorporated classical Indian dance gestures to describe the acts of cutting and shredding. These movements that accompanied the literal slashing and shredding are metaphors for the slicing and flaying of skin used in Hindu and Tantric Tibetan

rituals to denote the annihilation of ignorance, and the ego, often depicted in Kali iconography. The performance also referenced the stripping away of feminine power and protested the punishments that are meted out as a consequence of the cultural norms surrounding female shame. Ono's work *Cut Piece* was easily relatable to me due to her Asian heritage, as I have been raised in a similar patriarchy, as well as being exposed to the experiences of an Asian woman artist working in a mainly western context. The 'male gaze' so often used in western feminist debates is, for the non-European female artist, a much more complex issue of the added problems of racial profiling and stereotyping.

On the other hand, Abramović discovered the power of using her body as artistic material intuitively by "embodying the cerebral process of conceptual art" (Westcott 2010, p.72). As live art and audience interactive performance was a relatively new practice for me in 2003, Abramović's work provided material for important ongoing research. In her performance *Rhythm O* (1974), gallery audiences were invited to use sharp objects on her naked body, with weapons including knives, a loaded gun, and instruments of torture, that resulted in her being stabbed in the throat and having a gun forced into her mouth (2010, pp.73-76). Westcott suggests that Abramović's motivation and process in her live art performances served several purposes: to act out autobiographical trauma, address social or political alienation, achieve ecstasy, and to repeatedly subject herself to these "traumas" in order to gain a heightened state of consciousness.³⁴ "Her performances were constructed traumas that served as rehearsals for death – and in the meantime made her feel

³⁴ These self-harming actions used by contemporary performance artists are reminiscent of Hindu ascetics who "punish" their bodies in order to achieve enlightened states of consciousness. Often they perform these rituals as spectacles, many of which I have witnessed in India and Malaysia, where even laymen, under trance states, pierce their bodies and suspend themselves in the air with metal hooks.

much more alive" (2010, pp.72-73). Abramović and Ono have been important to my research because they were instrumental in challenging notions of the female, through their practice of dismantling concepts of "victimisation". By repositioning themselves in seemingly vulnerable situations, they instead demonstrated ownership and control over their own bodies.

Other artists who explored the body's relationship with cultural and religious institutions, and the excess and extreme to which contemporary artists have taken this practice, are described in Francesca Miglietti's *Extreme Bodies* (2000). In the chapter "Chosen Body"(p.15), she focuses on artists who use the iconographies of pain, torture, death, stigmata and religious martyrdom as inspiration and practice. Another chapter is entitled "Extraneous Body" (p.162), that focuses on the practice of body modification as art. Plastic surgery, transplants and implants, biotechnology, cyborgs, robots and the manipulation of identity through somatic transformation has been included in the work of artists like Matthew Barney (born 1967 USA), who famously used amputee artists in his work *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002), and Orlan (born Mireille Suzanne Francette Porte, France, 1947).

Renowned for her facial modifications through public spectacles of plastic surgery, Orlan exemplifies the practice of extreme body modification and hybridisation of the body and identity, through medical procedures that are presented as durational performance, and as spectacle. It is also an example of subverting tradition at its most extreme, transgressive level. My own interest in Orlan was to note the similarities of religious ascetic cults in India that use piercings, extreme facial and

body tattooing, scarification, and amputation, and who engage in rituals that involve seemingly masochistic practices.³⁵

Jill O'Bryan's (2005) *Carnal Art* is a detailed and vivid critique of Orlan's work and reinforces the concept of transformation through performance as "spectacle". In her section subtitled "The Performance of Shape -Shifting: Embodiment as Image, Embodiment as Text" (p. xiii), she describes Orlan's work as:

Art, which at its best investigates this experience of being, creates an experience of embodiment for the seer. Orlan accomplishes this. Her body in all of its states is presented as an investigation of her embodiment" (O'Bryan 2005, xv).

Orlan explains that it is not the result of the plastic surgery that is her goal, but the ritualised nature of the surgical process which in itself, as an elaborate spectacle, transforms the modified body as a site for public discourse. She travelled to India and studied the religious cult of Kali, and gathered sacred texts,³⁶ describing the body as a "sack or costume to be shed" (O'Bryan 2005, p.9). In an interview *Narcissism is Important* (2009), Orlan's response to people who labelled her work antifeminist says: "I am feminist; I am neo-feminist, post-feminist, alter-feminist [...] All my life I came second to men", and on the critique of her work being narcissistic, she says: "Narcissism is important, so long as you don't get lost in

³⁵ Descriptions of the austerities and traditions of Indian ascetics known as *Sadhus* can be found in Chapter Six, 'Inner Fire' (pp. 109 -117) in Dolf Hartsuiker's *Sadhus, Holy Men of India* (1993).

³⁶ There is no mention of what these (sacred Kali) texts were, even though O' Bryan mentions that Orlan intended to have them read during one of her durational surgical 'performances' and expressed her desire to use an Indian Classical dancer in one of them (O'Bryan, p.9). I find the inclusion of Kali and an Indian Classical dancer a typical example of tokenistic cultural appropriation used by some Western artists, which is another motivation for my own performance of Kali iconography that reclaims and situates her in her own cultural terrain and context.

one's reflection" (Orlan, 2009).³⁷ Most applicable to my practice of performing Kali iconography is Orlan's concept of transformation through the performed, ritualised body, a spectacle that invites discourse and, in analysing my own work, the body as living artefact.

While my practice does not literally involve self-harm, body modification or blood-letting, these examples of artists' use of violence imitates the violence of Kali iconography, that frequently depicts decapitation (including self-decapitation), flaying of skin, human sacrifice, and other ritualistic Tantric practices. These artistic practices align with my own, albeit with a stronger investment in pain, for example American performance artist, Ron Athey (b. 1961), and Italian-born, London based, Franko B (b. 1960), both of whom have used body piercing and other extreme methods in their work, while the latter primarily uses his own blood in live art performances, as discussed in Miglietti's *Extreme Bodies*. Finally, this chapter addresses the current, contemporary influences that have contributed to my practice of performance art, which began from my first encounter and eventual collaborations (2003 - 2007) with Mexican Performance artist, writer, and activist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, (b.1955), and founder of *La Pocha Nostra* performance art troupe.

4.4. Decolonising the Body

Gómez-Peña began his career in the early seventies and is famous for his style of performance-activism that seeks to "decolonise" the non-European body. He is a prolific writer as well as performer. In his 2005 publication, *Ethno Techno*, he

³⁷ The link to Orlan's interview can be found in the section on film, sound and visual in the bibliography.

discusses his pioneering methodology, aesthetics, and attitudes on cross-cultural issues, post-colonial history, immigration, "extreme identity", and what he refers to as performing against the cultural backdrop of "the mainstream bizarre". In the Chapter "Theatricalisations of postcolonial theory" he writes, "We are attempting to both parody and subvert the strategies of corporate multiculturalism and of what I term the culture of the mainstream bizarre..." (Gómez-Peña, p.249). In another section titled "Altered bodies and wounded bodies" (p.59), he discusses how the spectacle of wounded or mutilated bodies in performance art progressed from what can be termed as a subculture, to a cliché (p.59). In order to counteract the labels and perceptions of how performance artists engage in themes of decolonisation, often using sexualised or suffering bodies, he says:

Our formidable challenge in this respect is how to rehumanise, repoliticise, and decolonise our own bodies wounded by the media and intervened upon by the invisible surgery of pop culture, and to do it in such a way that our audiences are not even aware of it (Gómez-Peña 2005, pp.59-60).

As an international guest artist with the company (2003 to 2007) I was able to explore my own themes of "decolonisation", and experiment with audience interaction in Europe and the US as part of *La Pocha Nostra's* performances.³⁸

Gómez-Peña suggests, "the human body, our body, not the stage, is our true creation and *materia prima*" (2005, p.23). The following statement by Gómez-Peña is particularly important for the experience I wish to evoke in the spectator by "performing" Kali iconography:

³⁸ In 2003 I was invited to join the performance installation of *Fetishized Identities* at Performance Space, Sydney, which led to an invitation to a tour and performance in 2005 with Gómez-Peña's troupe in Gran Canary Islands, where we presented a three-hour durational performance titled *Archi Fronteres*. A gallery of photo-performances (of GPP and myself) featured in the 2009 Greece Biennale catalogue, and images from this series have been used as book covers and in magazine articles.

The questions and dilemmas embodied in the images and rituals I present can continue to haunt the spectator's dreams, memories, and conversations. The objective is not to "like" or "understand" performance art, but to create sediment in the audience's psyche (Gómez-Peña 2005, p.25).



Fig.35. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Rakini Devi, *Archi-Fronteras*, Gran Canary Islands 2005, Image by Teresa Correa

Gómez-Peña wrote of our collaboration:

The most complex and enriching aspects of working with Rakini involved incorporating her artistic methodology and iconography into our practice and this challenge was realised by together developing a form of hybridised aesthetics. Ultimately, Rakini's involvement (*In Mapo Corpo* 2007) added a rich cultural layer to the Pocha cultural and political mix. Her work was incredibly well received in every location even to the point that many colleagues

commented that this version of *Mapo Corpo* was perhaps the best we had ever performed (Gómez-Peña, 2007).³⁹

Through my collaboration with Gómez-Peña, I met San Francisco based Mexican performance artist Violeta Luna (b. 1969), with whom I have an ongoing collaboration. In Gómez-Peña's *Mapo Corpo* (2007 Michigan USA), in which Luna and I both performed, the "colonisation" of the body as territory was articulated through the insertion of 45 acupuncture needles into Luna's naked body, which was presented as a clinical "sacrifice" on a surgical gurney, attended by a professional acupuncturist. The audience was then invited to remove each



Fig.36. Roberto Siffuentes and Rakini Devi, rehearsals for *Mapo Corpo*, San Francisco, 2007, Image by Violeta Luna.

³⁹ This quote is from a statement as part of my grant acquittal report to Australia Council, who funded a five-week performance residency with La Pocha Nostra in San Francisco in 2007. I collaborated and toured with the troupe to Michigan, Oregon, and finally Glasgow for the NRLA (National Review of Live Art 2007).

needle, a gesture that could be seen as a ritualised activation of reconciliation, healing, and restoration, and ultimately, as I perceived it, a powerful synthesis of collective grief and protest.

Simultaneously, in my persona of hybrid Spanish/Kali widow, I performed a funeral ritual on the body of artist Roberto Sifuentes, in what can be described as a "mortuary diorama". Sifuentes was totally encased in transparent plastic, enshrouded with the real liver and heart of a cow to represent his organs. Straddled over his body, my ritual actions involved cutting him out of the wrappings, removing the "organs", washing and shaving his chest, after which I wrote and painted symbols in Bengali script on his body. The juxta-positioning of the clinical and ritual actions created an intense process, in which the audience were intuitively and emotionally involved.



Fig. 37. Rakini Devi and Violeta Luna, *The Two Madonnas*, Ex Teresa Museum, Mexico City, Image by Oliver Ludwig, 2014.

My performances with Gómez-Peña's *La Pocha Nostra* led to my current ongoing collaboration with Violeta Luna, who now performs as an independent solo artist. This collaboration was further developed in 2014, when I travelled to Mexico and USA for two months. Over a period of a month in Mexico City, we developed *The Two Madonnas*, a durational performance installation, presented at the *Ex Teresa Arte Actual Museum*, a sixteenth-century former church, and convent of Santa Teresa la Antigua, in Mexico City (Fig. 37). Our investigation explored hybrid female religious iconography, namely the Latin American Madonna and Indigenous Mexican and Indian Hindu Goddesses.

The methodology of using each other's bodies as collaborator and canvas, incorporated ritual actions performed together and separately. Subsequently, we have both used this collaborative process in our solo works.⁴⁰ Mexican San Francisco-based Luna is an example of a contemporary artist and a "case study", whose practice highlights our similar yet different exploration of the "other" cultural female body situated in western environments. Luna is a graduate from the Centro Universitario de Teatro and La Casa del Teatro (Mexico City). She describes her practice as activating the relationship between theatre, performance art and

⁴⁰ I include an excerpt from my notes on the process of *The Two Madonnas*:

Week two of our process has been spent integrating our aesthetics, working on building new personas. Drawing inspiration from the rich historical environment that is Mexico City, 'the two Madonnas' embarked on several pilgrimages to famous sites of art and archaeology. Tomorrow, Good Friday, we will travel to Puebla. The city was founded in 1531 in an area called Cuetlaxcoapan, which means *where serpents change their skin*, in between two of the main indigenous settlements at the time, Tlaxcala and Cholula. Focusing on my practice of using the body as a sacred site, each of us has discovered similar motifs in our work. I could not think of a more auspicious time to be in Mexico, to witness the ritual, ceremony and fervour of Holy Week. (Rakini Devi, April 2014, Mexico City).

community engagement. Many of her works focus on Mexican social issues of illegal immigration and border politics. Luna works between Mexico City, USA and tours internationally. In her 2010 essay "Body in Action: Cartographies for Socially Engaged Performance", Luna divides her practice interests into three areas; namely i) The De-colonized Body, ii) The Cultural Body, and iii) The Illegal Body (Luna 2010, p.1).

My collaborations with Gómez-Peña, *La Pocha Nostra*, and Luna encouraged my development of hybrid personas that incorporated Mexican Catholic aesthetics, which I discovered as being analogous to Tantric Hindu iconography. These performances which arguably speaks to the colonial but also the post-colonial subject, also allowed me to experiment with a different kind of audience interaction in performance, one that is not bound by western perceptions of ethnic "authenticity". In his Chapter titled "Problems in cultural performance" in *The Anthropology of Cultural Performance* (2013), Lowell Lewis cites Talal Asad who comments from an intercultural perspective, that:

"It could be argued that 'translating' an alien form of life, another culture, is not always done best through the representational discourse of ethnography, that under certain conditions a dramatic performance, the execution of a dance, or the playing of a piece of music might be more apt" (1986: 159). As I will examine below, this is a delicate and fraught approach on the part of ethnographers but is common and unproblematic from the perspective of cultural insiders creating their own performances.

(Lowell Lewis 2013, p.132)

Most importantly, the action of using traditional imagery and religious motifs to critique and transgress social mores and stereotypical perceptions of ethnicity and gender inspired me to commit unreservedly to my own individual vision in the creation of live art whereby the body can be both symbol and text, and I its sole author. This chapter has overviewed my precedents of practice and the body as ritual artifact, where I have attempted to incorporate the theories that link the threads of my research and performance methodology, which is that of *tradition as transgression*. The next chapter will explore the sacred and secular geographies of the new work, *Urban Kali*.

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This practice, which arguably speaks to the colonial but also the post-colonial subject, also allowed me to experiment with a different kind of audience interaction in performance, one that is not bound by western perceptions of ethnic "authenticity". Most importantly, the action of using traditional imagery and religious motifs to critique and transgress social mores and stereotypical perceptions of ethnicity and gender inspired me to commit unreservedly to my own individual vision in the creation of live art whereby the body can be both symbol and text, and I its sole author.

This chapter has overviewed my precedents of practice and the body as ritual Artifact. The next chapter will explore the sacred and secular geographies of the new work *Urban Kali*.



Fig. 38. Rakini Devi, *The Female Pope*, San Sebastian Theatre, Mexico City, image by Niña Yhared, 2014.

CHAPTER FIVE: Exploring the Sacred & Secular Geographies of Urban Kali

Introduction

This chapter explores the external and internal structures that shape the new work *Urban Kali*. The "external" aspects of the new work comprise the staging, presentation, and structure of the work, including dance choreography, sound, and video projection. The "internal" alludes to the creative material generated from the physicality and inward reflection of the performer, with the aim of connecting both to the aesthetics of the work. This is achieved by drawing a thread between both the inward and external aspects of the work, through a multidisciplinary dance performance. The choreography and aesthetic of the performance can be described as embodied knowledge, drawn from a repertoire of archival, stylised dance vocabulary. Soneji cites Gold and Gujar (p.15) who described such an embodied memory as having a "thick autonomy", that by nature of its density, uncovers aspects of "embodiment, sensuousness, places, materiality, the everyday, and vanished landscapes" (Soneji 2014, p.15). The process of choreography is achieved through research, internalization, improvisation, and experimentation.

Traversing from a "vanished" or past memory in this scholarly enquiry is also a metaphor for "sacred" or traditional concepts. Both aspects, the external and internal, seek to draw a thread through the notion of "sacred to secular". The new work, closely aligned to the written component of the thesis, also seeks to reinforce the concept of "tradition as transgressive" in the context of contemporary cross-cultural performance. *Urban Kali*, understood as a collage of danced, painted, and filmed multidisciplinary performance modes, are all personal interpretations of

sacred Hindu dance culture in the context of Goddess Kali iconography. The central persona of "Urban Kali" as both motif and core element drives the choreography and concept of the work.

Specific elements of the new work are outlined in order to demonstrate how the work developed, and the significance and underpinning motivation that influenced every stage of the work. Though the work is one continuous piece, I have separated this chapter into sequences or titles used in my own notes, drawing on excerpts from work journals where I have mapped, sketched and story-boarded the work. The aim in making this new work is to achieve a more refined, distilled, and conceptual aesthetic, by using sacred symbols in a contemporary context, in both choreographic repertoire, and as staging device, in order to demonstrate my methodology of translating "tradition" into a secular performance that speaks to contemporary concerns.



Fig. 39. Rakini Devi *Urban Kali* journal, experimenting with textures and text, 2017.

5.1. Setting the Stage for *Urban Kali*

The set design for *Urban Kali* is based on *yantras*, or sacred Hindu diagrams, a subject I have studied and experimented with in many of my past dance productions.⁴¹ The difference in this new work is that it is led by my scholarly and practice-led research, to analyse and reflect on the process at each step. Since three of the main choreographic concepts are based around these symbols, this next section briefly describes the sacred geometric designs called *yantras*.

5.1.1. *Yantras*: Sacred Dimensions

The word *yantra* is a derivative of the Sanskrit word *yam*, which translates as sustaining and activating the energy within any object or idea (Khanna 1979, p.11). Since the eleventh century AD, Sanskrit texts have described the many scientific uses of *yantras*, in the areas of architecture, astronomy, alchemy, and chemistry, as well as in a religious context, as tools for meditation and ritual. The symbolic syntax of *yantra* imagery is often categorised by their varied uses. They are used as architectural designs for temples, and astronomical and astrological maps, but are used primarily in Hindu ritual worship, and are often devoted to specific deities, both male and female, or to various aspects of a single deity (Khanna 1979, pp. 21-23). For example, The Kali *yantra* serves as both "receptacle" and symbolic manifestation of Her attributes. The cone, as the central triangle diagram of many *yantras*, is symbolic of the female energy personified as the black void of Kali.

⁴¹ My 1997 production of *Yantra* is listed in the appendix of performances including program notes that describe the context of the work.

Yantras have three distinct features and are a composite of three primary functions: Firstly, the form principle known as *Akriti-rupa*; secondly the principle of function, or *Kriya-rupa*; and thirdly, the power principle, *Sakti-rupa*. (Khanna 1979, p.11). All three attributes of the *yantra* are used in the making of this new work, *Urban Kali*. In order of sequences, *yantra*, and the *Cone of Kali* or triangle *yantra*. All three aspects, form, function and the 'power' of imagery is employed in the use of *yantras* in the work.

Yantras and Hindu Tantric philosophy have been, and continue to provide, inspiration for many contemporary artists from both eastern and western cultures. Historically for instance, they have contributed to shaping new creative aesthetics in contemporary art, and were an influence for many twentieth century artists. Scholars of Eastern philosophy, Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna in their publication, *The Tantric Way: Art, Science, Ritual* (1977), cite the works of visual artists Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, and Constantin Brancusi, all of whom were interested in Tantric Hindu philosophy. Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) described the art of *yantras* as "dynamic equilibrium", and many of his abstract artworks featuring vertical and horizontal lines as representations of the male/female principle were influenced by the duality of Tantric philosophy, (1977, p.90).

The question of whether an artist can use *yantras* in cross disciplinary contemporary art is also debated by Mookerjee and Khanna, who suggest that though the diverse characteristics of *yantras* attract artists with the intention of reinventing themselves, or perhaps an idea, *yantras* cannot be separated from their specific cultural origins (p.91). Therefore, it is perhaps worth noting that the

complexities of *yantra* symbolism as cosmic and psychic paths to self- awareness and tools for ritual ceremonies have historically borrowed elements from different religious traditions. For example Tibetan, Buddhist, Tantric, and Vedic traditions have often merged and crossed over (Khanna, pp.21-23).

As noted previously noted, three installations based on the formal principles of the *yantra* frame the structure of this new creative project in order to create a terrain through which I could map the performance. These are firstly, *The Canopy*, a large cream gauze canopy, used primarily for projection. Secondly *The Never Ending Sari*, a dance solo, using a twelve-metre red sari as a prop; and critically, *The Cone of Kali*. This was a large black mesh cone symbolising the abstract form of Kali as "void", and as a three-dimensional *yantra* or sacred ritual geometric design.



Fig. 40. Rakini Devi *Kali Symbol Yantra*, Journal 1995, watercolour, and inks.

5.1.2. *The Canopy (Square Yantra)*

More personally, my interest in the canopy originates from my childhood memories of mosquito nets used in India and Burma, and I have used it previously in my earlier dance theatre work *Woman In Transit* (2002), as a theatrical prop that frames the narrative. In *Urban Kali*, however, I have sought to avoid any literal, sentimental, or narrative interpretation. The concept of the canopy is also drawn from the temporary roadside shrines characteristic of religious festivals in Kolkata. The canopy was also used as a fundamental aspect of three previous performance installations: *The Female Pope* (Sydney, 2013) *Kali Madonna (Village Bizarre*, Sydney 2014), and *UFO (Unidentified Female Object)* a site-specific work performed as part of *Siteworks* at the Bundanon Trust in 2015.

The square shape of the canopy is the basis for all *yantras* and depicts the foundation of the cosmos itself. Its four sides, which contain the four cardinal directions as well as the merging of vertical and horizontal lines, are also symbolic of the "terrestrial world that must be transcended and symbolic of the totality of space" (Khanna, p.33). The four entrance/exits of the canopy also mirror the four "portals" outlined in most *yantras*, which are known as "cosmic doors", through which one may enter through action or meditation. Central to most squares are other *yantra* shapes, for example circles and triangles, and other symbols such as lotuses, or sacred texts (pp.33-34).⁴²

⁴² The function of the canopy changed in the doctoral presentation of the new work, and is fully described in Chapter Six.

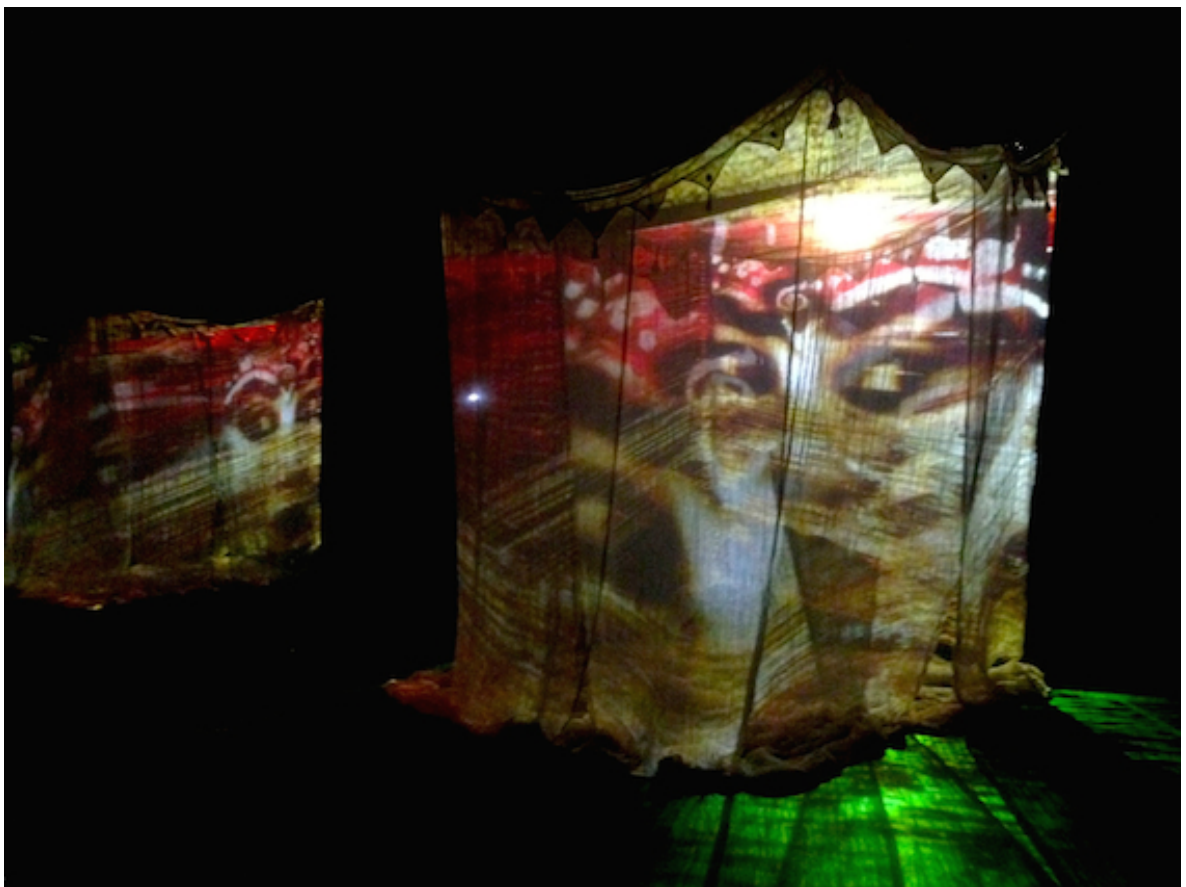


Fig. 41 and 42, *The Canopy*, *Urban Kali* development with Sam James, Mullins Theatre, 2016.

Fig. 41 and 42 are from the first stage development of the new work *Urban Kali*, with Filmmaker Sam James at the Joan Sutherland Mullins Theatre, where the canopy was the central piece.

5.1.3. *The Never Ending Sari (Rectangle Yantra)*

In *Urban Kali*, the sari choreography is where I alternately, mesh and separate the gestural language of sacred and secular dance. The main prop for this segment is a long red gold-bordered sari,⁴³ made from two full-length saris sewn in the centre, measuring twelve meters in length, to create the "never-ending" effect. On reflecting on past works, saris in many forms have always played an important role in my performance aesthetics. From draping them in traditional styles for my *Kalika* company dancers, to using them as canopies and decorative screens, to twisting them into ropes and creating tensions across the stage, to completely wrapping myself into a cocooned shape, saris have been like a second skin to me from an early age. In my domestic life, saris and shawls have always been used in lieu of curtains and home furnishings. Being surrounded daily by the beauty of Indian silk and cotton textiles remind me constantly of my close affinity with my heritage, and my love of Indian aesthetics.

From my early observations of my aunt draping her saris in different ways, her hands deftly pleating and tucking, to my mother's lush Burmese velvet and cotton sarongs that she would fold out and neatly pleat into her waist, fabrics have fascinated and held me enthralled. At age three I began fashioning long "skirts" by

⁴³ Initially this segment was created with the use of a black sari, but following my return from India in early 2017, I changed the colour to red, because black was hard to discern from the black stage surface. This instantly changed the dynamics of the choreography, as well as the visual landscape of the work.

using my mother's Burmese sarongs belted with string at my waist, thus beginning my characteristic love of elaborate costuming. The biggest influence of the sari began with my training in Indian classical dance, when the "practice sari", worn short, to the knee with loose cotton pants underneath for practicality and modesty combined, became an essential routine of dance practice. In preparation for class, a sari would have to be folded lengthwise to measure to below the knees, then pleated and ironed. This ritual preparation became part of the mental preparation of a class, a time for reflecting on the repertoire learned, and the memorising of steps and sequences. In Indian classical dance repertoire, the tying of the sari, or ritual "adorning", is characteristic of narrative dance items. In the Indian classical dance tradition, it is a stylized garment that has evolved through the decades but retained its function as a ritual dance costume.

The story of *The Never Ending Sari* in the epic Mahabharata,⁴⁴ relates how Queen Draupadi, the wife of the Pandava King brothers, is used as a pawn in a chess game, and upon losing, is about to be humiliated by the winning King, who attempts to disrobe her in public. Crying out to Lord Krishna in silent prayer, her sari unravels endlessly, protecting her modesty, and revealing a miracle and divine intervention. Though this dance sequence in *Urban Kali* does not have any connection to the tale in the Mahabharata, it is worth noting that the mythology of the never-ending sari has been narrated many times in Indian dance and drama. It is also an example of how I have subverted traditional mythology in my work.

⁴⁴ The epic Hindu tale was also made famous by Peter Brook's theatrical 1985 nine-hour version of *The Mahabharata* (that I witnessed in its full length form at the Perth International Arts Festival).

As part of the materiality that is associated with my heritage, the sari is also a metaphor for the "fabric" of femininity, and "unravels" a language that, through the text of the moving body, articulates the attributes of Kali in a distinctly female voice. Additionally, as the traditional dress of Indian women, the sari is laden with symbolism. As both a symbol of national pride and female identity, the sari represents multiple aspects of Indian women. As a rite of passage, when an Indian girl comes of age, or first menstruates, she discards her childish clothing (usually pants and tunics, or, in South India, long skirts) to be ceremoniously attired for the first time in a sari.⁴⁵ In Hindu culture the draping of saris has always been associated with auspiciousness and ritual.

In *Urban Kali*, the choreography follows the elongated rectangular shape of the sari, which as a *yantra*, was used as the basis and foundation of temple architecture devoted to Goddess worship (Khanna 1979, p.145). It is also in contrast to the square of the canopy, which is static. The rectangle symbolizes the "rhythmic continuity of the creative play of shakti" (1979, p.145), and in the context of the choreography, it frames the sensual uncoiling of the *Kundalini* chakra (the coiled feminine energy) representing Kali's ritual dance of destruction and creation. Additionally, the median line running from north to south of the red sari is in reference to the *Yogini Yantra* (sacred diagram of the female yogi), which represents the opposing dynamics of upward and downward energies, to celebrate the feminine divine as the source of all creation (p.145).

⁴⁵ In my mother's Burmese tradition, it was the ear-boring ceremony, which was a coming of age rite, when a girl is adorned with jewellery and clothing, including a special hairstyle of a coiled high bun on the head, denoting her status as an adult woman.

The dissection of the space with the sari is also a metaphor for the sacrificial sword of Kali, which slices through the materiality of life, through ego and *maya* (illusion), to confront the self. Red veils and garments signify bridal finery, marriage, and auspiciousness in Hindu culture, but in the context of *Urban Kali*, the many textures and shades of red signify the bloody markings of Kali, as well as ritual and sacrifice. The upward and downward movement (upstage and downstage) was also the basis of ancient dance traditions, due to the design of long narrow corridors of temple architecture, resulting in choreography that accommodated this trajectory. Though Indian classical dance traditions have evolved, the backward and forward gait, with the dancer never turning his/her back on the audience, still retains a specific charm and characteristic of sacred Temple dance culture.



Fig. 43. Rakini Devi, rehearsal at *Readymade Studios*, image by Heidrun Löhr, 2016.

By dismantling and reassembling several aspects of these dance techniques, in the new work, *Urban Kali*, I demonstrate how I have transformed several sacred concepts into a personal and secular dance vocabulary.

5.1.4. *The Cone of Kali* (Yoni Yantra: Female symbol)

In each segment of *Urban Kali*, there is a distinct motif of Kali personified as the black void. Kali is reproduced in *The Cone of Kali*, as a ritual artifact and abstract interpretation of her many iconographies. Primarily, it represents the triangle, which is also the main symbol in the Kali Yantra. According to Hindu mythology, the triangle is said to be the first symbolic form to emerge from the chaos of creation, and since space can only be captured in three lines, the conical shape of the triangle is described as a sacred enclosure (1979, p.21). The triangle, when inverted is the shape of the *yonī*, or female sex, and also symbolises the feminine power, or *sakti*. "The triangle, the yoni-yantra, the immemorial sign of woman, represents the Great Mother as the source of all life, the cosmic womb. "The yoni is extolled as a sacred area", writes Mookerjee. In Tantric Hinduism, rituals are performed known as *yonī-puja*, or vulva-rite, when either a living woman or representations of the yoni in paint, stone, wood or metal is worshipped (1988, p.30).

This emblem (Fig.44) used in Kali *yantra*, is referred to as *yonī-mandala*, and when in union with the upward triangle representing *Siva*, or the male principal, it creates the rhythmic energy of the cosmos. When the two triangles "penetrate" each other, they create a five-pointed star shape signifying the five elements: earth or *krishiti*, water or *ap*, energy or *tejas*, air or *marut*, and space, or *vyoman* (Mookerjee &

Khanna 1977, p.55). The hexagon is often used in many Tantric rituals, as representations of the opposing polarities of male and female (p.32).



Fig. 44. *Kali Yantra*, Internet image.

In the context of *Urban Kali*, the use of a black metallic mesh fabric serves as a modern, abstract manifestation of Kali, as receptacle and spiralling energy, as well as a dark force that protects yet obliterates. The spiral is also a powerful symbol, known as *Kundalini Sakti*, or feminine energy depicted in many *yantras* and paintings on *chakras*, or subtle psychic centres in the body. In my approach to narrowing the attributes and symbolism of the main motifs in *Urban Kali*, the cone also represents the aspect of Kali "clad in space" or *Digambar*. I also understand the cone as linking the various dimensions experienced in space through dance and theatre, connecting both aspects of the theoretical and practical or creative aspects of the performance.

Of interest in this context are the words of Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer (1888 – 1943):

I struggle between two souls in my breast- one painting-oriented, or rather philosophical-artistic: the other theatrical; or, to put it bluntly, an ethical soul and an aesthetic one (in Goldberg 2001, p.103).

Schlemmer's work is interesting to me because it was about the essential investigation of space, evident in his complex, even "obsessive" notation systems and diagrams where he mapped and documented performances in detail, in his diaries. His contribution to the Bauhaus movement is said to be of great value to the development of performance theory (Goldberg 2001, pp.102-103).



Fig. 45. Rakini Devi, *Cone of Kali*, work in progress. Photo by Alana Dimou, QLab, Joan Sutherland Arts Centre Penrith, 2016.

Schlemmer's words also resonate with me as an apt description for my own exploration of the body and objects in space as inseparable elements of the one

concept. As a motif, just as Kali is still worshipped in the natural formations of caves, stones and other artifacts in India, she is visible in the urban landscapes of the world as equally as being hidden in secret sects, or the confines of Indian shrines and temples.

5.2. Materiality and the Language of Performance

Inseparable to my performance-making practice is the use of fabrics, colour, painting, as well as ritualised objects and costuming, that serve as multiple layers of artistic expression, in order to create a language drawn from the materiality of what I describe as my signature performance iconography. By using fabrics - the sari for instance, and other objects in the space, I seek to connect to the audience by offering these material representations as a conduit or bridge between the performer and spectator.

The unraveling of the sari, the pleating or knotting, sweeping or constricting tensions of the garment reveal, and articulate the unseen text of the body, inviting, yet mysterious. By using traditional dress and the language of the body, in combination with the aesthetics of objects and performance environment, I create a corporeal language that can be perceived on multiple levels. As performer-maker and scholar, Margaret Cameron describes, the attempt to translate an experience or a concept itself becomes a language and performance of its own, and further, by both taking herself in and out of the context, she both makes and is made of the cultural body (Cameron 2012, p.18). Cameron's thinking resonates with my own provocation in devising a choreographic project, when a strong dance sequence is repeated and referenced throughout the work, creating a rhythm that returns to the

core or main choreographic score.

Marsh's writing on performance art, ritual and documentation, observes that the translations or interpretations of language may be perceived by the audience as a collage of "borders, boundaries and crossings", revealing the role that language plays, and how, in its construction or translation, it is inevitably flawed, reminding us of our own connection to others, and the complexities of relationships within our inner and outer worlds (Marsh 2014, p.151). In the context of the new work, the rebound from inner to outer worlds, from past to present, or from tradition to transgression, creates its own dynamic. The rhythm that this movement evokes, creates a language that spans time and space, a language evocatively described by Marsh, as the language of a "woman's body, understood as seeping and never contained" (2014, p.153). This dynamic may extend to any artifact or object used in performance. In *Urban Kali*, the mosquito net or canopy, the cone, and the sari become "ritual objects" in the space. The sari and the canopy are examples of a tactile materiality that have been subverted from their culturally traditional functions. Instead they are employed in the context of a contemporary performance work as dynamic feminine motifs that articulate my protest against patriarchal oppression.

Australian textile artist, scholar and archaeologist, Diana Wood Conroy examines approaches to reading texts in relation to ancient artifacts and suggests that the meaning of an object lies less *within* the object and rather more within its reading (1995, p.39). Wood Conroy's concept may be understood as akin to the reading and interpretation of sacred and symbolic motifs used in my work. The concept of the artist as an "intertextual construct" corresponds with my own practice of

translating sacred Hindu texts, and subverting traditional dance movements to address subjects such as Indian misogyny. Even though Wood Conroy is referencing texts and objects in archaeological research, her observations resonate with my sense of the body as *iconised* artifact that can exude boundless representations and interpretations. I have used text and symbols written, painted and as collage to represent ideas on different surfaces of fabrics, walls, floors and on the body in order to transgress traditional "meaning". Figure 45 illustrates a four-hour durational performance titled *Cone of Kali* where I experimented with the various materials and textures used later in the new work *Urban Kali*, for example hair, the mesh cone, painting, and wool.

5.3. Multidisciplinary aspect of Urban Kali: Video and Sound Architecture

While my artistic process is fundamentally grounded in the body, and understood as the receptacle of knowledge, and a living, dancing, ritual artifact, my collaborations with video and sound artists are methods that can extend and amplify the concepts I am seeking to explore. In developing the audiovisual aspects of *Urban Kali*, I have undertaken various stages of development in order to explore staging and audiovisual design.⁴⁶ In May 2017 I began a new collaboration with sound artist and filmmaker Karl Ford. The intensive first development of ideas proved a marked difference in the evolution of the work, in that it connected the written research to the performative new work with a fresh approach. The video segments are integral parts of the unfolding choreographic live dance segments, and stand apart as both performance installation and as transitions or pathways

⁴⁶ Initially I undertook a residency in collaboration with Sam James at the Joan Sutherland, Penrith in 2016 as part of QLab space residency in order to experimenting with video and staging concepts. Though the work undertaken in the initial development was extremely important, it was necessary to rework these ideas in 2017, at which point I began a new collaboration with Karl Ford.

into different choreographic sequences.



Fig.46. Rakini Devi in *Cone of Kali*, *Voyeurism Program*, *107 Projects*, Redfern, image by Julie Vulcan, 2016.

Within the live performance, sound and video create a dynamic experience for the viewer that simultaneously unsettles stereotypical conceptions of classical Indian dance. Having integrated film and dance choreography since 1993, my purpose has always been to use it in order to highlight or demonstrate concepts that are impossible to present in real time. For example, subtle details of hand gestures can be magnified and creatively presented, with sound or text immediately “activating” the image with a specific meaning. Site-specific film sequences contrast with the present enactment of the theme, taking the audience momentarily into another world. In the new work, I have attempted to use video in several ways.

In the past I have used video to enhance or amplify details or aspects of the performance that would speak directly to the work, a practice I have continued in *Urban Kali*. What distinguishes this new work is my process, which is directly informed and shaped by the exegesis, while retaining the core of the subject. The video sequences are specifically designed to amplify key concepts and choreographic motifs connected to Kali and the more political concerns this work is engaged with. I am also interested in demonstrating how these gestures of the pre-recorded sequences, composed of montage or textures can speak to the aesthetics of the work without having to explain their significance. The work is non-narrative and non-linear, but structurally it follows a flow of thought that embraces the darkly dramatic aspects of Kali Iconography as performance.

While chapter Five has sought to articulate both the formal and ritual aspects employed in *Urban Kali*, chapter Six fleshes out the concepts and execution of ideas used by integrating sound and video within the full scope of the *Urban Kali* performance. Examples of how the film connects to the written and performed component of *Urban Kali* are described in the concluding Chapter Six in detail, in sequential order of the performance.

Chapter Six: The Performance of *Urban Kali*

Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I seek to critically reflect on the dance-theatre production, *Urban Kali*, which was developed over three years, and finally presented in two public performances at *The Lennox Theatre*, Parramatta Riverside (22 and 23 September 2017). The elements under discussion in this chapter include the choreography, audiovisual and set design, and staging. In the making of this new work, I sought to link the threads of my exegetical research to the creative process and eventual production outcome. Not all the concepts translated into the live performance, but they are representative of my performance-making methodology. In some instances, I also discuss aspects of the work-in-progress to the final outcome. Consequently, this chapter follows the chronological scene sequence of the final production in order to contextualise both the dramaturgical and pragmatic decisions taken in order to realise the final outcomes of my creative research.

As previously discussed, while lighting and audiovisual projection technology plays an important part role in developing multiple options for representing iconography, the source, core and site of starting point for the artistic process is the performer's body, which, given my heritage of extensive training in Indian classical dance, is understood as the receptacle of knowledge, and as a living, dancing, ritual artifact. Video and sound technology are methods that are used to extend and amplify thematic preoccupations. The video sequences employing extreme close-ups of the hands, feet and eyes draw attention to those parts of the dancing body that "isolate" expressive aspects of the intricate vocabulary fundamental to my dance

training, while the moving dancing body on stage reflects and links each concept through different scenes.⁴⁷ There are no gentle segues into sequences, but sudden changes of mood and content. *Urban Kali* uses video in several ways:

Firstly, it does so in order to highlight or magnify an idea or gesture. For example, the close ups of eyes, and painted hands and feet, to heighten the focus on these parts of the body that are given precedence in all Indian classical dance training. The hands "washed in blood" are evocative rather than literal. Secondly, video is employed to set a scene or mood as for instance in the scene addressing the subject matter of female infanticide. The projection was accompanied by a pre-recorded spoken word text explicitly describing the ways in which newborn baby girls are killed. Thirdly, projection is used to enhance the performance terrain, in order to heighten or enhance a performance concept. For example, the last scene is set against an "epic" projection that places the final iconography of Kali within an abstract montage of textures, colours and lighting, to enhance the image of the body as shrine and sacred artefact. From my perspective, this is the strongest integration of audiovisual media with the live moving body in my performance projects to date, and I attribute this to my academic research undertaken concurrently with the development of the creative project.

⁴⁷ The new creative work has gone through various stages of development, starting with a 2016 theatre residency at the Joan Sutherland as part of QLab space residency. Two weeks were spent experimenting with video and staging concepts with video-artist, Sam James. Though the work was extremely important and helpful, a year later, as the development of the exegesis grew, edits and changes were inevitable. In May 2017 I began a new collaboration with sound artist and audiovisual artist, Karl Ford. The intensive first development of ideas proved a marked difference in the evolution of the work, in that it connected the written research to the performative new work with a fresh approach.

This chapter also acknowledges production notes and my practice of journaling, along with diagrams or images of the sequences, which act as a guide through the performance terrain of *Urban Kali*. The creative team for the final production was myself, as performer/devisor, Karl Ford as video and sound creator. Lighting designer Karen Norris mentored technical theatre student, Frankie Clarke with her lighting design. The scale of the work was disproportionate to the level of production support, but the inevitable compromises due to a small team and smaller production budget were overridden by the opportunity to work with FORM dance projects⁴⁸, who presented the work at an established theatre.

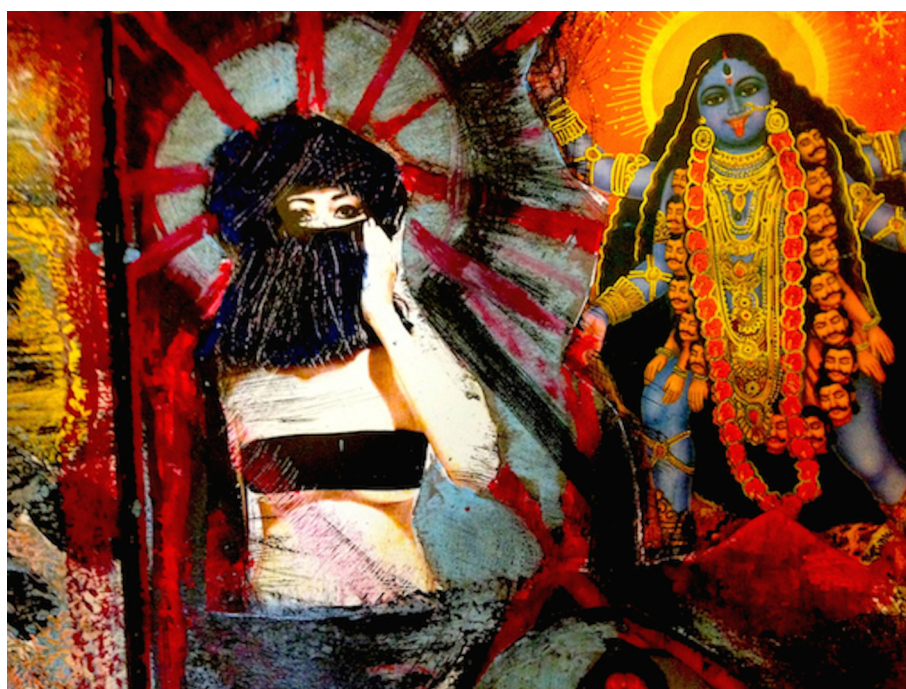


Fig. 47. Rakini Devi *Urban Kali* Programme art, 2017.

⁴⁸ Their in-kind support included the venue costs, five weeks of rehearsal in their Parramatta studios; publicity, marketing and administration as well as a cash contribution. Competitive funding for UOW research students also contributed to the research and development of the work over 2016-2017. FORM'S marketing team insured I had several reviewers attend, as well as scheduled radio interviews on the new work.

Video documentation of *Urban Kali* is available to view on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/236385820> Password RAKINI.

This chapter attempts to demonstrate how the structure of the work finally came to fruition, and how I either adhered to or deviated from the initial mapping of the work.



Fig. 48 and 49. Projection images from *Urban Kali*, by Karl Ford.

6.1. *Urban Kali: from Page to Stage*

The starting point for all my performance works is my process working with journals, painting, and writing. In this chapter, I include examples of the mapping and structuring of the work in my journals, maintained throughout the entire candidature and to document the process. Fig. 50. shows my mapping of the stage with the placement of the three main props: The canopy (square), the cone (triangle), and the diagonal sari laid across to mark the trajectory of the dance. The elements of this mapping remained the same except for the placement of the canopy.



Fig. 50. Stage design, Rakini Devi journal, 2017

Below is an example of how I use journals and storyboarding as a means of developing and dismantling the work in several ways:

Planning the Process:

Provocation: Outline ideas/ Space and structures

Justify choices

Imagine it with whatever resources

Elements: concept, process, media

Shaping the concept

What is the locus of the work?

What is the materiality of object in relation to body in space?

How to use every aspect of the subject to trigger ideas?

What is the driving force in your work?

What is its mechanism?

Means of how one may represent something symbolic:

Using both the labyrinth and vanishing point of language.

Language (gesture)

Grammar (dance)

Ritual

Ritual artefacts & props

The 'ritual object' and all its qualities: Mosquito net/ canopy, sari, Cone of Kali.

Methods of Transformation

Transforming ~ Vanishing point

Absurdity

Obsessive quality

Tableaux vivant

Mythology: Trace/Absence/imprint of body

Changing identity /Dissolving the Self

Creating a surreal reality

Proximity to present/past

Repetitious exercises: create a rhythm.

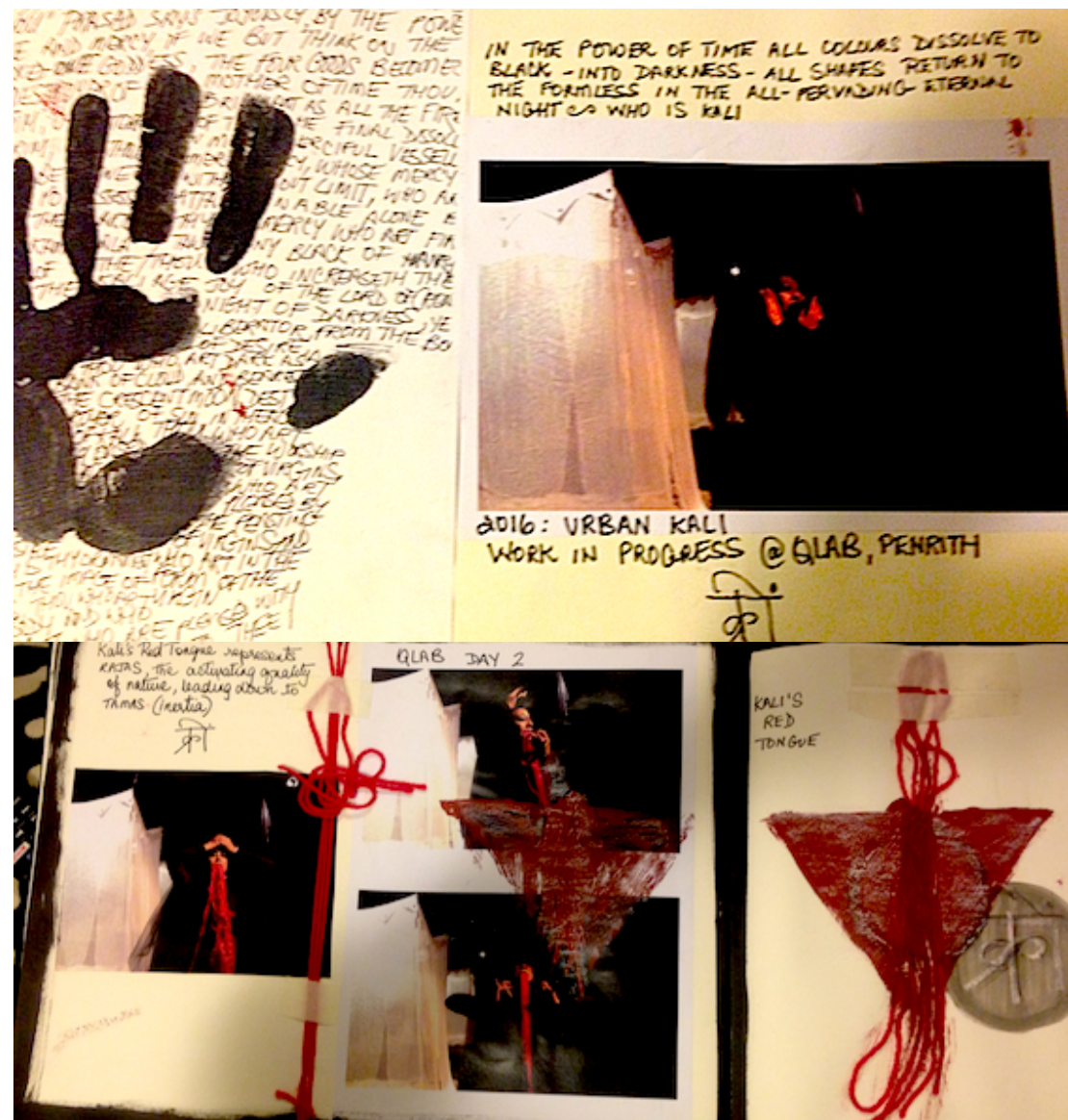


Fig. 51. Journal art pages, by Rakini Devi, 2016.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ In Fig. 51 of my journal, I play with the textures of red wool to symbolise Kali's tongue, while using the installed canopy in the space during a two-week residency at the Joan Sutherland Theatre (April 2016).

6.1.1. Foyer Exhibition

Urban Kali was preceded by a foyer exhibition of my journal art, and included a screen monitor with a looped selection of more of my performance and journal images. The foyer exhibition consisted of nine images from my journal paintings of collaged performance photographs by Heidrun Löhr, while a large exhibit featured a collage of my journals over the last three years of my candidature that documented my process. The exhibition was important for me to include as a part of the performance presentation, in order to place it in the context of my work in relation to constant visual thinking. By this I mean experimenting with colour palettes, and imagining the imprinting/integrating of the performing body and actual materials such as objects, props and costuming. The process of journaling, in the context of structuring the performance space, and my visual arts practice has always been the primary tool for creating or imagining performance. In "dancing on paper", (as I have often referred to my own work), and by inserting the dancing body onto an ideal surreal landscape, I then have a point of reference that will underpin the aesthetics of the work, whether it is a live art durational performance, or a dance theatre work.

"Self-photography" and video documenting are essential in the process of developing shapes and choreographic ideas when working alone in a studio. The foyer exhibition works were representative of my art- work imposed onto the photographs by Heidrun Löhr, who has documented many of my past performances, dating back to 2002. The central piece in the foyer exhibition titled *Female Iconography* was a collage of drawings, performance images, and paintings from current journals that exemplify my practice, specifically during my candidature, between 2014 and 2017.



Fig.52. Foyer exhibition artworks by Rakini Devi, painting/collage on original photographs by Heidrun Löhr, oil pastels and ink.

The audience enters the theatre to a looped projection of an image of my face with red wool streaming from my mouth, used to symbolise Kali's tongue, a motif previously discussed in Chapter Three. Karl Ford's looped sound score, using short samples of Indian classical vocals mixed with down tempo electronic percussion and soft droning synth sounds established a lyrical ambiance for the work.⁵⁰ Initially the plan was for the canopy to be positioned centre-stage, with projections of my artwork featuring Kali, *yantras*, and dancing images, and to be used functionally for entrances and exits at the very least. Due to the stage dimensions at the Lennox, this proved impossible, and so a compromise was made to use it in token reference to the Hindu roadside shines in Kolkata, called *pandals* (described in Chapter 1.4.). On reflecting on this segment of the work, I am unhappy with this compromise. To my mind the canopy used emblematically

⁵⁰ The gauze cream canopy was the surface of the projection, which varied from the initial plan to use all three-dimensions, due to the short depth of the theatre and lack of backstage crew to assist with its mid-performance removal.

was unsuccessful, and consequently, any meaning I may have attempted to convey, was lost to audiences.

6.1.2. Scene One: *Urban Kali* video sequence.

Once the audience is seated, the sound score ends, the lights fade to black, and the first scene unfolds. Videoed on location in inner city Sydney streets and at *Readymade Studios*, the opening video sequence positions "Urban Kali" in a contemporary context. By locating the persona of "Urban Kali" in the present, the video imagery situates her in the modern world, and sets the stage for various "transgressive" representations of the Goddess Kali. The projected rotating *yantra*, or sacred Hindu geometric diagram, references the sacred symbolism utilised throughout the work, from my hand-painted *yantras* on the stage floor at the foot of the shrine, to the rotating white mandala that appears later in the work. At the core of the *yantra*, Ford's collage of vivid colours is interspersed with images of my "urban" persona against the city skyline, and footage of me standing on a main street with cars whizzing past. In the video, I go through several actions, using as a prop a small plaque of Kali, (fig x) in order to suggest that wherever I may be, traces of Kali remain. Other images are manipulated at various speeds, to create a visual montage.

The video montage was created during a week of collaboration with Karl Ford, where we worked from a list of concepts for each video sequence. An example of the schedule for video concepts, shown below, is an idea of how I managed the very intense video development with Karl Ford at *Readymade Studios*, Ultimo, Sydney, in May/June 2017.

Film Schedule Urban Kali

Day One Monday May 29.

1. Video red sari unravelling
2. Red painted hands and black mesh
3. Painted feet and hands
4. Record voice

Day Two Tuesday 30 May: Full costume and make up dress for video.

Red skirt dance

Red wool-eating sequence

Black mesh and close-ups

Cone with black short dress "wall dance"¹

Day Three Wed 31st May: Textures

Textures of gauze, wool, and mesh for projection

Experimenting with light and fabrics

Day Four Thursday 1st June: Cream and blood

Working with cream costuming to project "blood" streaming imagery

Wrapping head in cream flower garlands sequence

Video bloody hands over bucket sequence

Some of the figures are from still images that were integrated into moving images for the first opening video sequence, and framed within the rotating *yantra* design by Ford.

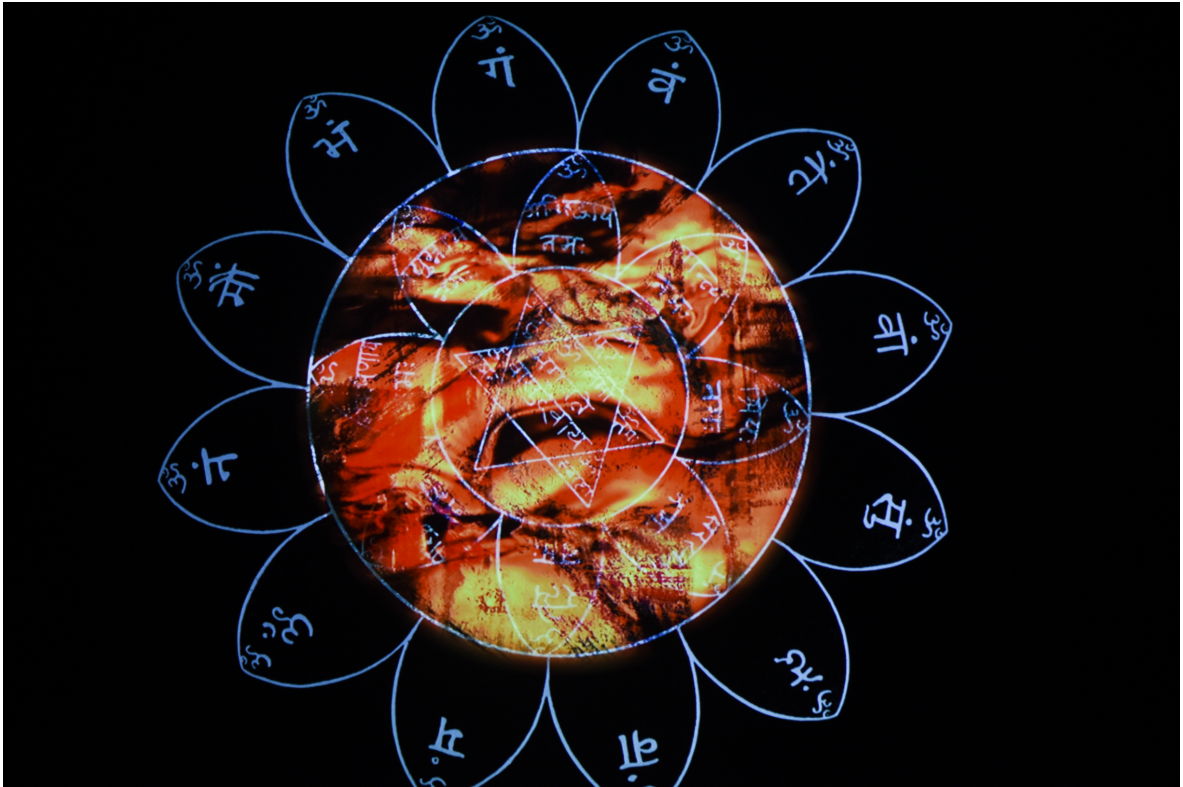
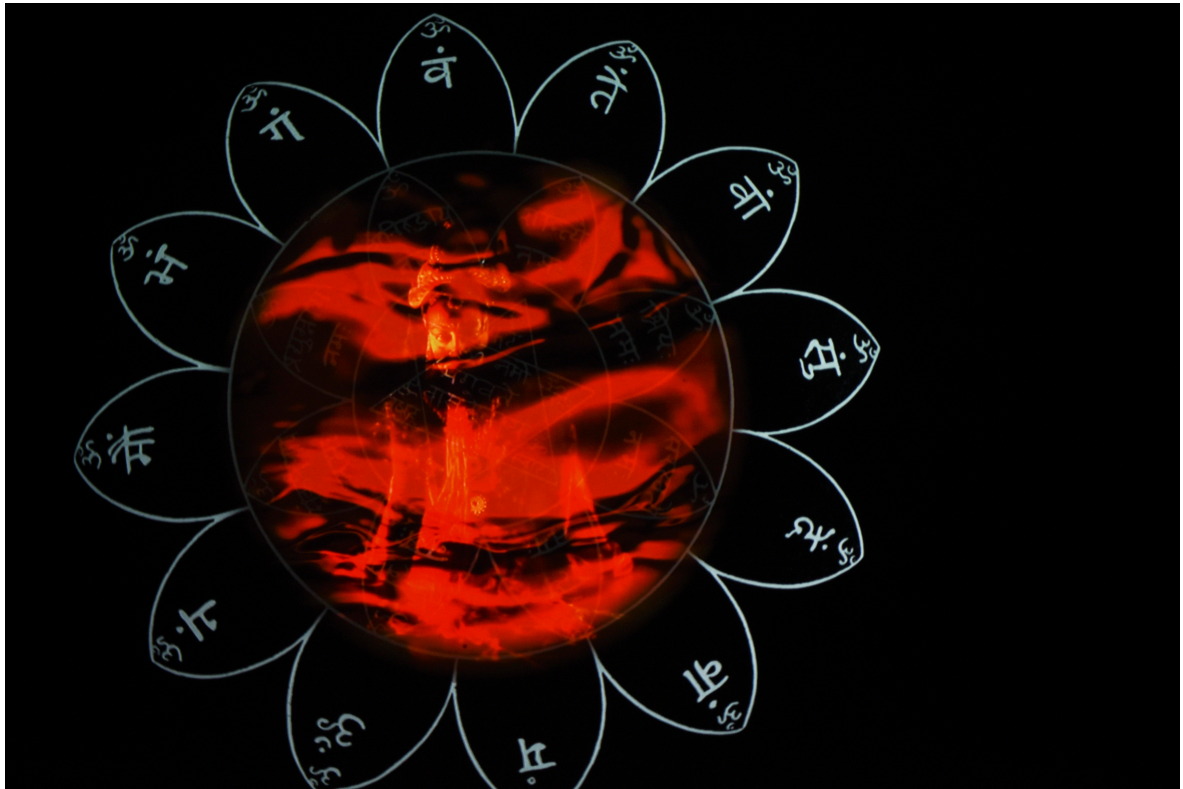


Fig. 53 and 54, Video projections by Karl Ford, *Urban Kali* 2017, Image: Heidrun Löhr.

6.1.3. Scene Two: *The Never Ending Sari*

As the opening video montage concludes in a crescendo of sound and image, the curtains draw slowly over the cyclorama, and the stage fades to black, as the first notes of Ford's *Platter Descend* are heard. The sound of bells, cymbals, and a rumbling undertone sets a tone that is ritualistic and processional, as the *Never Ending Sari* dance sequence begins. This sequence is where the gestural language of both sacred and secular dance are alternately meshed and separated. The main scenic element in this segment is a long red gold-bordered sari made from two full-length saris sewn in the centre, measuring twelve metres in order to create the "never-ending" effect. The very first movement is indicative of the way in which I have subverted the classical Indian dance tradition, whereby a dancer's entry is customarily an elaborately stylised and choreographed walk onto the stage. Typically, an opening dance includes an invocation to a deity acknowledged in an onstage shrine, also customary in classical recitals, a tradition referred to by the installation of a shrine to Kali, downstage right, which was dimly lit throughout the show.

When developing the choreography for this first dance, the concept of using a long sari was predominantly a staging/costuming strategy understood as extending my history of incorporating fabrics and textures, characteristic of my performance aesthetic. The working title for this dance sequence is in reference to a popular dance theme in Indian mythology, from the epic Hindu tale *The Mahabharata*. The "never ending sari" is a story in the epic Sanskrit Hindu *Mahābhārata* (circa fourth century) attributed to the scholar Vyasa. It depicts the story of how the God Krishna manifested a miracle to protect the modesty of Queen Draupadi. Queen

Draupadi, the wife of the Pandava King brothers, is used as a pawn in a chess game, and upon losing, is “won” by King Dushasana, who attempts to humiliate her by disrobing her in public. Crying out to Lord Krishna in silent prayer, her sari unravels endlessly, revealing a miracle and divine intervention. This story has been narrated many times in Indian dance and theatre repertoire, and made famous by Peter Brook’s theatrical 1985 nine-hour version of *The Mahabharata* (that I witnessed in its full length form at the Perth International Arts Festival). In the early stages of developing my performance (2015-2016), the long sari was also to have been a personal satirical response to my experiences of working with (non Indian) directors who have all suggested I don a sari regardless of the role I am cast in.

The performance score sought to integrate these motivations or ideas by contrasting the myth of the never-ending sari, as well as my own experiences of being typecast to wear a sari in other people’s performances, forever trapping me in a culturally specific performance persona.⁵¹ As amusing and entertaining as this scene may have been, this concept was discarded as it distracted from my central preoccupation with Kali. Initially At first I planned to project on to the unravelled sections of the sari, however, the technical complexity proved daunting and distracting, and the idea was discarded. As is often the case in making work, the practicalities of staging influence the work, so the sequences changed continuously right up until the final months before the show.

⁵¹ As part of the full-length work, *Women in Transit*, (2004) I performed a “one minute sari” where I darted on stage, attired only in a sari blouse and petticoat, set a time-clock to one minute then draped myself in a sari, triumphantly completing on the bell.

The choreography in this first dance also references the attributes of Kali through gestures, moving between the personas of devotee and goddess.⁵²

The holding aloft of the long red sari invokes images of processions from both Hindu and Catholic festivals to the Madonna/Goddess Kali. The slow entry was also driven by my memories of Hindu religious processions, witnessed countless times in India, but also in Mexico City (2014), as discussed in Chapter Four. In both the pre-recorded and live aspects of the work, the materiality of textures, colours, and sacred diagrams are pervasive, because in my performances, the tactility of colour, whether in costuming, make up or props, exude a "functional" aspect that can be manipulated and imbued with meaning.



Fig. 55. *The Never Ending Sari*, Journal painting, Rakini Devi, 2016

⁵² The choreography developed and transitioned through 2016 into early 2017, through two dance residencies (awarded by Ausdance NSW in 2016 & 2017). It was also presented as a work in progress at the BOLD festival and conference in Canberra in March 2017 at the Q2 Theatre.

In this work the sari is so laden with meaning that the simple act of carrying it aloft, referencing the canopy of a religious procession, or the ritualistic entrance of a holy artefact taken into a temple became the image I wanted to project in the first dance. During the many stages of creative development, the sari was unravelled countless times, and each time the actuality of its presence, laid straight or diagonal across the studio floor seemed more powerful than any physical interaction with it. During my visit to the dance village *Nrityagram*, India, in December 2016/January 2017, I also experimented with the sari concept in a site-specific context, if only to experience its historic connection to Indian soil.



Fig. 56. and 57. *Nrityagram*, The Dance Village, Bangalore, India, image by Pallavi Naidu, 2017.

The structure of the choreography follows the elongated rectangular shape of the sari, which as a *yantra*, was used as the basis and foundation of temple architecture devoted to Goddess worship (Khanna 1979, p.145). It is also in

contrast to the square of the canopy, which is static. The rectangle symbolises the “rhythmic continuity of the creative play of Shakti” (1979, p.145), and in the context of the choreography, it frames the sensual uncoiling of the *Kundalini* chakra, or coiled feminine energy, representing Kali’s ritual dance of destruction and creation.

This motif is repeated later in the performance, in the "snake" dance. Additionally, the median line running from north to south of the red sari references the *Yogini Yantra* (sacred diagram of the female yogi), which represents the opposing dynamics of upward and downward energies, celebrating the feminine divine as the source of all creation (Khanna, p.145). The dissection of the space with the sari is also a metaphor for the sacrificial sword of Kali, which slices through the materiality of life, through ego and *maya* (illusion), to confront the self. Red veils and garments signify bridal finery, marriage, and auspiciousness in Hindu culture, but in the context of *Urban Kali*, the many textures and shades of red signify the bloody markings of Kali, as well as ritual and sacrifice. The opening dance sequence simultaneously references and subverts the devotional aspect of my practice, previously discussed in Chapter Three describing the performance of Kali iconography as a secular interpretation of *bhakti* (devotional aspect in Indian classical dance). *bhakti* (devotional aspect in Indian classical dance).

As previously outlined in Chapter 3.5. “My hybrid interpretation of Kali iconography, while drawn from a personal, experiential source, at all times references and pays homage to Kolkata Kali, as Mother and Destroyer, and Shakti Supreme (Female energy).” In *The Never Ending Sari* sequence, I not only “reclaim” Kali, but also insinuate her into a culturally displaced world as an emblem

of female power, without relinquishing her mythological, awe-inspiring, and terrifying aspects.



Fig. 58. *The Never Ending Sari*, in *Urban Kali*, image by Heidrun Löhr,

Sound Composition by Karl Ford

Urban Kali was my third collaboration with sound composer and video artist Karl Ford who provided me with sound compositions from the early stages of the making of the new work. His summation of the work is described in his own words:

The sound design was intended to reflect a contemporary setting rather than that of traditional Indian classical music, though traditional rhythms served as a conceptual springboard for the structure of the compositions. The sound-score was drawn from field recordings, live sampled percussive instruments/objects, manipulated recordings of the composer's voice and edits from improvised guitar, bass and synthesizer sessions. (Karl Ford, Personal communication, 2018).

In drawing my concepts together, it was an advantage to have the video and sound designed and developed by the same artist, for example, having sound to inform the video imagery and offer a musical structure to support the development of the choreography from the very beginning of the project.

6.1.4. Scene Three: Video - *The Black Bee Of My Mind*

The first video sequence after the *The Never-Ending Sari* dance introduces the Goddess Kali through devotional poetry in Her praise. This is the first time in the performance that Kali is introduced as the central theme of the work. The use of the black mesh (through which the sequence is recorded) represents the black void of Kali, with fleeting glimpses of her eyes, jewels, crown, and red palmed hands being indicative of the often disjointed or dream-like visions of Kali devotees and described through countless poems and hymns in her name. Red palms seen in the same sequence, reference the red palm prints of *Sati*,⁵³ signifying widows who immolated themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. The images also feature dancing red painted feet, often depicted in Kali iconography, where only her feet, adorned with anklets are framed in many temple and home shrines.

The poems voiced by myself in this sequence are adapted from devotional hymns to Kali by Bengali saint and poet Ramprasad Sen (Bengal, 1717-1775) and Kamalakanta Bhattacharya, another Bengali poet and yogi (Bengal, 1769-1869):

The black bee of my mind is drawn in sheer delight

To the black lotus flower of mother Shyama's feet

The blue flower of the feet of Kali, Shiva's consort

Tasteless to the bee, are the blossoms of desire

⁵³ A subject I have addressed several times in past works.

My mother's feet are black, and black too is the bee

Black is made one with black

This much of the mystery

*My mortal eyes behold, then hastily retreat*⁵⁴

The lotus feet of Kali are a place of pilgrimage for me

Deep in my heart's lily

Meditating on them

I float in an ocean of bliss

In Kali's name, where is there place for sin?

When head is not, headache cannot remain

As when a fire consumes a pile of cotton

So all goes

In Kali's name

(Mookerjee 1988, pp.102-103)

The video and spoken word poetry end with the cyclorama left bare except for a single shaft of horizontal light stretching across it, as the first beats of Ford's *Dark Drum* composition ushers me back onto stage.

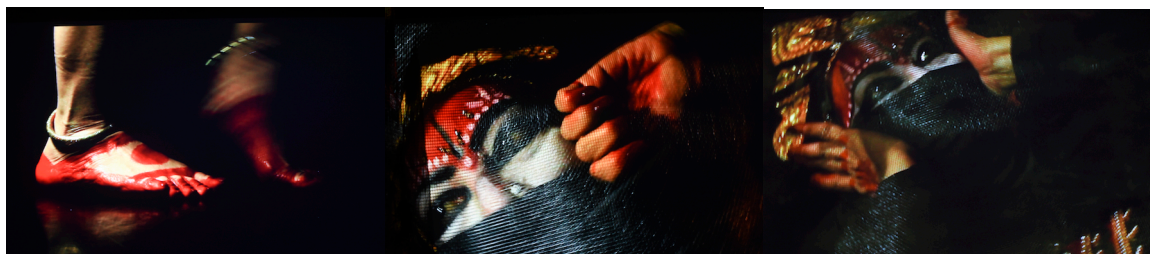


Fig. 59. Video projections by Karl Ford.

⁵⁴ This excerpt is adapted from several translations from the devotional poetry to Kali by Kamalakanta Bhattacharya.

6.1.5. Scene Four: *Dark Drum* dance.

Dark Drum, the second dance sequence, is the title of the music composition by Ford, who again collaborated closely with me regarding various nuances and dance beats in order to demonstrate the rhythmic footwork of both forms of Indian classical dance, *Odissi* and *Bharatanatyam*, although the piece itself was far from traditional. For example, balancing, using only the heels to move backwards rapidly, is characteristic of *Odissi* classical dance, a movement I have subverted many times in my contemporary dance performances as a theatrical style to trigger transitions, or change the speed of movements, directions and emotions.

The straight-legged heel movements are in total opposition to the western dance aesthetic of using the balls of the feet to balance or rise, which is why I have used this movement often, in order to highlight the tensions between western and eastern dance traditions. The dance ends on a podium, where I "drum" the beats with my feet on its wooden base. The lighting was designed to highlight my eyes and foot isolations through interaction with strips and squares of light. The dynamic of the dance was intentional, to break the dreamy, poetic, slow video sequence that preceded it, lending the scene a starkness using shapes that reflect squares and strips of buildings or urban life. As is the case with any choreography in my own work, there is always self-critique that drives me to change aspects of the work. I found this segment difficult in terms of transitions and as continuity of flow. Given the opportunity to remount *Urban Kali*, the *Dark Drum* sequence would be completely restructured.



Fig. 60. Rakini Devi, *Urban Kali* performance image by Heidrun Löhr, 2017.



Fig. 61. Rakini Devi, *Urban Kali* performance image by Heidrun Löhr, 2017.

6.1.6. Scene Five: Bloody Infanticide video sequence.

After the energy of the preceding dance, the mood changes abruptly with the next video sequence confronting the audience with arguably the most contentious aspect of the work. I approach my reflection and critique of this scene in two specific perspectives: from a dramaturgical viewpoint, and a critique or argument of the context. From a dramaturgical perspective, there are various options pertaining to structure and delivery, but my intention in presenting the five minute video

sequence and using the pre-recorded text was to present the "fact" of female infanticide in India without any sentimental interpretation. The strong video imagery, depicting bloodied hands over a metal bucket offered its own stark, ominous connotations.

This sequence in particular is also exemplary of an ideal collaboration between deviser and audio-visual artist, especially when dealing with culturally sensitive subjects. Ford's attention to detail when engaging with this highly emotive subject matter, and his translation of my ideas to sound and video was an intensely satisfying collaborative experience. I allowed him the freedom, within the parameters of the subject matter, to explore a range of ideas around the challenging content of female infanticide. His idea of using an ultrasound image to open the scene, accompanied by his sound score, added to the potency.



Fig.62. Video projection by Karl Ford.

The most confronting aspect of this sequence was its emphasis on the methods employed in female infanticide. Some audience members were sufficiently offended to walk out. Since, however, the purpose of this segment was precisely to demonstrate the horrific practice of female infanticide, I remain committed to the presentation of this material. The narrated text was drawn from several Indian news reports and articles about female infanticide, which I adapted into a script.⁵⁵ The text presented below is as it was spoken, with pauses throughout the piece. The text is a complete script as it was recorded for the sequence, and was adapted from various newspaper articles on female infanticide, including Soma Wadhwa's 1995 "Lambs to Slaughter" in *Outlook Magazine*.⁵⁶

Script 1. Indian News report: Adapted from compiled news articles.

(Spoken in "news reporters voice")

Police in central India have found 390 body parts from fetuses and newborn babies — thought to be unwanted girls — buried in the backyard of a Christian missionary hospital.

Separately, the Government said that it was setting up a network of girls' homes — dubbed the "cradle scheme" — in an effort to stop poor Indians from killing their daughters.

Both announcements threw a spotlight on female infanticide and foeticide in India, where an estimated ten million baby girls have been killed by their parents in the past twenty years.

(Pause, and change of tone):

⁵⁵ In my work *Disturbing Elements* (2008, Carlton Courthouse, Melbourne), these same scripts were part of a live spoken word segment, read out to an audience while images of my paintings were projected onto a gauze screen.

⁵⁶ Wadhwa was Features Editor for Outlook magazine (1995 -2005), Delhi. The main emphasis in her writings was on issues of education, gender, and health. She also wrote on Minorities and social trends. For this she travelled extensively through the country. Among other issues, she wrote on women who were branded witches in Singhbhum, Bihar. Her interviews include the confession of midwives who had committed serial infanticide for the low fee of 100 rupees (approx. 20 cents AU) or less in Bihar for each act of foeticide or infanticide.

Script 2. *The Midwives Tale*: Adapted from an article titled *Lambs to Slaughter* by Soma Wadhwa, (18.10.1995).

Yes we kill baby girls for a pittance, says Adila Devi, from the poor region in Bihar.

Poor people like us cannot protest. Many a time a man has refused to pay us after we have killed the daughter, but who can we approach for justice?

After delivering babies in the surrounding villages for the past 40 years now, the old midwife says she has done away with approximately 150 infant girls.

The methods are simple as they are varied.

The baby girls are usually strangled with a rope

Sometimes the midwife bends her spine backward till it snaps.

A handful of fertiliser pushed down the infant's throat also does the job.

A lump of black salt placed in the newborn's mouth takes an hour to kill the infant.

The less experienced midwives who are not adept at these skills,

Choose to stuff the baby into a clay pot and seal her in with fresh dough.

This way, they say, they do not have to actually see the baby dying.

This takes around two hours.

It is not so much the act but the aftermath that haunts these women.

It's the fear that some wild animal may discover the infant carcass and drag it out of the undergrowth where they are usually dumped.

I break out in a cold sweat, one says, and I am tormented at the thought that I have deprived so many souls of last rites.

The video begins with a shimmering, blue ultrasound image, just before the voiceover begins reporting on statistics of female infanticide in India. After a pause, I begin to narrate the experiences of a midwife in India and the methods used to dispose of female babies. The spoken text is accompanied by footage of my hand gestures, bending, twisting, curving, and clenching in a dance of their own, some

movements of which coincided with descriptions of the "methods" used in female infanticide. The double-hand gestures seen in this footage, may be understood as "transgressive" being based on hand gesture exercises in Indian Classical dance grammar, where the hands study a vocabulary of language that is specific, stylised and employed in both pure dance or narrative repertoire.

Chandralekha has remarked that many dancers, in their pursuit of virtuosity, have camouflaged the fundamentals of dance, which, in her opinion, "reveal the richest sources of poetry in the language of the body" (Bharucha 1995, pp.154-155).

Chandralekha's words had great impact particularly in this context in which I sought to heighten and deepen the basic grammar and vocabulary of Indian classical dance and in the process, created my own gestural vocabulary. A key example are the gestures used in this video sequence, where the hands articulate a language that is stylised but abstract, where the bending back of the palm, or the gripping of a wrist with another, where the dipping of one hand may evoke the limpness of death, while other movements imply the violence of the spoken actions, so as to evoke the unspeakable. For instance, when I grip my fingers and bend them back sharply with the other hand, coinciding with the sentence, "Sometimes the midwife bends her spine backward till it snaps," I am seeking to create affect, to force the viewer to imagine the unimaginable. Credit again must be given to Ford for his attention to details in selecting, editing, and capturing the nuances and intricacies of my gestural language that successfully channelled the intent of the text.



Fig.63. Video projection by Karl Ford, image by Heidrun Löhr, 2017.

In order to draw together the connecting threads of Kali iconography as feminist protest in my critique of *Urban Kali*, I discuss how this filmed scene connects to the overall work. My intention was to present Kali iconography in various ways, just as I have explained how the body has been used throughout the work through dance, these are the intentions behind the separate film sequences: -

- Black Bee Film sequence: As Kali devotee/and reflection of Kali
- Female Infanticide film sequence: As Kali the Mother
- Finale: Body as Living Artifact and Shrine

In the first film sequence, "Black Bee", Kali is introduced from the aspect of the devotee, and as an invocation to the Goddess. In the "infanticide " film sequence, though Kali is absent, her role as protector and avenging Mother, and slayer of demons, is implied. Here, she is the personification of protest against female

infanticide that is rife in a country that claims a culture of Goddess worship. Kali's violent imagery of beheadings and dancing in cremation grounds, wearing a girdle of dismembered limbs and a garland of "heads", are misleading to the western eye. Her many iconographies are metaphors for the annihilation of the ego, ignorance and human attachment.

In Bengal, where I constantly situate her iconography, she is seen as a protector and merciful mother, albeit terrifying in her countenance. Bengali devotees of Kali take on childlike attributes, for in her iconography, she is depicted with two babies who hang from her earlobes as earrings, and is said to look upon her followers as a mother looks to her children. The Saint Paramahansa Ramakrishna addresses her as "Mother" in all devotional poetry. The final poem in *Urban Kali* is a poem titled *Kali The Mother*, by Swami Vivekananda.

6.1.7. Scene Six: Snake Dance

After the harrowing material of the infanticide sequence, it seems almost as if the body seeks to merge with the enveloping blackness, save for the appearance of a slowly rotating *yantra*. In this scene, the blackness is all consuming, the sacred diagram of the rotating mandala is white, and the repetitious opening and closing of palms and feet mirror the unfolding and closing of the many "petals" of the lotus on which many *yantras* are designed. The opening and closing of knees, fingers and toes, the gestures that fan open and close, indicate the sacred centres of the head, heart, and abdomen, the subtle power sources of knowledge often referred to as *chakras* in Tantric Hindu yogic practice.

Ford and I titled this section, *Snake Dance* because of its snake-like movements. He describes the composition for both the sound and the Yantra projection as, "The mandala slowly rotates groaning and grinding like an ancient metallic object. Echoing discordant metallic percussion and low surging resonance creates an industrial soundscape that ties together this age-old mechanism with the contemporary industrialised landscape" (Ford 2018). The choreography, that was predominantly centred on the prone body, used coiling and uncoiling of the fingers, and toes, and articulated, through gesture, the raised "hood" of the snake. It also references the *Kundalini Shakti*, or "coiled feminine energy" (Mookerjee 1982, p.10). Dramaturgically speaking, I also wanted to "shed" the many layers, metaphorical and physical, of the persona of "Urban Kali" as each scene unfolded. Like the shedding of a snakeskin, each scene evolved from the stylised elaborate depiction of Kali as invocation and hybrid icon, to dancing Kali, playing with the Hindu concepts of the "rhythms of the cosmos", to the depiction of birth, life and death within the ever-turning *yantra* or mandala of the human cycle of life.

Some reviewers remarked on the "contemporary dance" aspect of this section, and also its yoga-like movements, and both aspects are valid observations, since my dance training has also encompassed contemporary western practices, and I attribute my yoga practice to my longevity as a dancer. Floor-work, an alien concept in Indian classical dance is a particularly favourite method in my practice, as it introduces an entirely new relationship with space and the body's proximity to the ground.⁵⁷ Shifts of weight, and the use of the spine, shoulders and heels of the

⁵⁷ In the early eighties I studied western contemporary dance for eight years under Ruth Osborne in Perth, and from the nineties onwards I studied and worked with body awareness techniques such as Feldenkrais with Jim Hughes, and contact improvisation, and release based techniques with

feet, the heaviness of the skull and the rotations of neck and limbs all contributed to the aesthetics of this dance, while the presence of the cone and the rotating mandala form a landscape that become incorporated into the body.

As I slither into the darkness, the focus shifts to the black mesh cone, now activated by Ford's shimmering projection of overlaid colours. For several minutes, it comes alive as a glimmering yet seemingly solid mass. The cone, representing an abstract force of Kali, is festooned with several swathes of black hair and red wool, again referencing blood, and the wild "canopy" of long dishevelled hair as depicted in Kali iconography. Highlighted by the swirling projection, glimpses of my "garland of skulls" are seen. These aspects of the installation are props I usually use on my body during many of my durational performances.⁵⁸

A few colleagues wondered if I may or should enter the cone and perform in it. The decision to not inhabit the cone in the final performance was to give each aspect of the staging its own time in space. The cone sequence,⁵⁹ of approximately three minutes, leads into the finale, as the entire cyclorama is revealed, to the accompaniment of a final poem to Kali, and I take my place on the podium, at the centre of the screen.

Rosalind Crisp. These interactions gave me an insight into working with the western body, as well as useful methods and pathways into my own dance research.

⁵⁸ *The Cone of Kali* was also the title of a four-hour durational live art installation I presented (107 Projects, Redfern, 2016) where I used the cone as a cocoon, as well as using hair and red paint and wool to extend some ideas as research for the final show.

⁵⁹ At the end of the first stage development at Qlab, Penrith (with video artist, Sam James) a short showing was videoed, using the concepts explored during the two week residency, resulting in documentation that influenced the final performance.

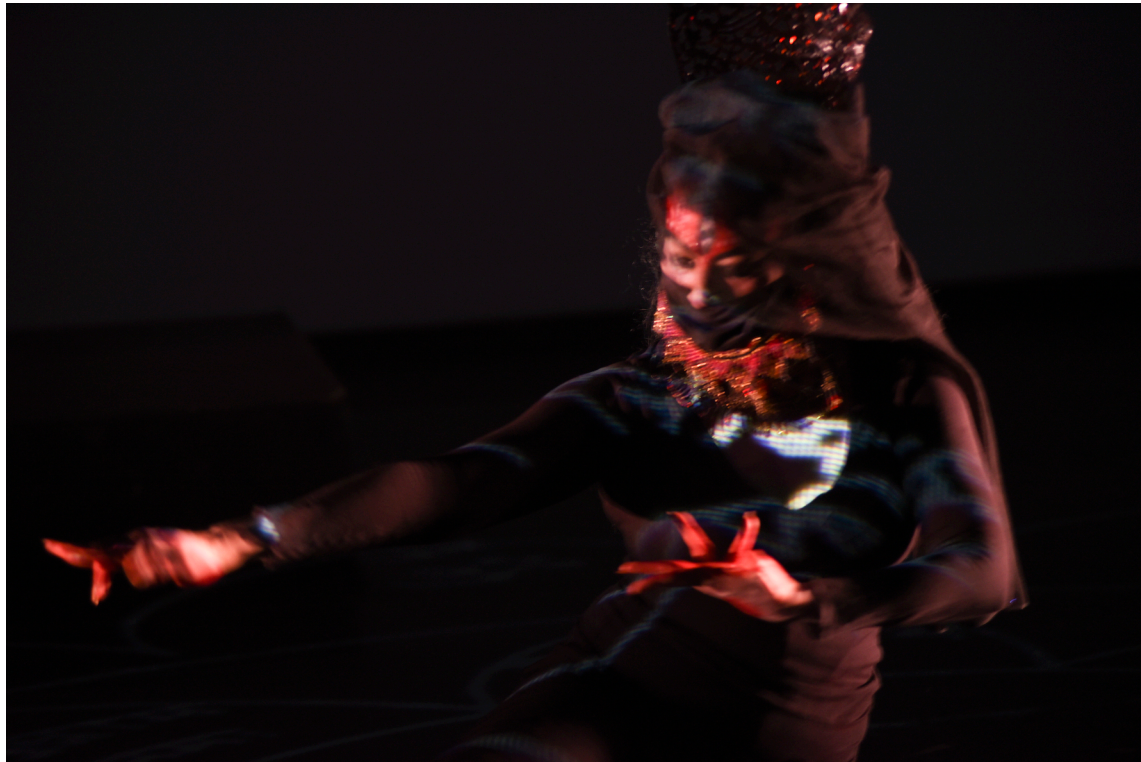


Fig.64. Rakini Devi, *Urban Kali* performance image by Heidrun Löhr, 2017.

6.1.8. Finale: Body as Artifact.

The final sequence of the body framed by Ford's "epic" projections, began with a dark ominous tower of a silhouetted figure reminiscent of an ancient, excavated, female artefact. The film is accompanied by a slowly soaring soundscape, beginning with an ominous low rumbling over which my recorded voice recites a final hymn to Kali, by the Kali devotee and disciple of the Bengali Saint Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda (Kolkata, 1863-1902). The recorded text was adapted from his 1898 poem:

Kali The Mother

The stars are blotted out,

The clouds are covering clouds,

It is darkness vibrant, sonant.

*In the roaring, whirling wind
Are the souls of a million lunatics
Just loose from the prison-house,
Wrenching trees by the roots,
Sweeping all from the path.
The sea has joined the fray,
And swirls up mountain-waves,
To reach the pitchy sky.
The flash of lurid light
Reveals on every side
A thousand, thousand shades
Of Death begrimed and black —
Scattering plagues and sorrows,
Dancing mad with joy,
Come, Mother, come!
For Terror is Thy name,
Death is in Thy breath,
And every shaking step
Destroys a world for e'er.
Thou 'Time', the All-Destroyer!
Come, O Mother, come!
Who dares misery love,
And hug the form of Death,
Dance in Destruction's dance,
To him the Mother comes.*

Swami Vivekananda (Mookerjee 1988, *Kali The Feminine Force* p.108)

The poem ends, with the final minutes focused on the now changing backdrop of soft white “clouds” to a bloody red avalanche, finally fading to black.⁶⁰

The final image of *Urban Kali* resonates with ancient sacred sites in Bengal called *sakti-peetha* (meaning, literally the seat of female power).⁶¹ For example, an image of the goddess's head enshrined in a thousand-year old West Bengal temple called the *Kiriteswari Shakti Peeth*, is worshipped as a red stone.⁶² Sacred artifacts, statues and relics, smothered in red ritual powder, and adorned with garlands, are images that inspired the last sequence of *Urban Kali*. My garlanded body on a podium is in homage to this aesthetic. The body, as sacred "seat of feminine power", ritual artifact, and timeless relic, transcends, momentarily, the earthly limitations of the artist, to a glimpse of the divine. It is the moment of transformation, infused with the unfashionable concept of dance as spiritual expression that drives my performance practice, and supports my argument for its relevance and importance.

⁶⁰ Initially, the intention of this scene was to use several “actions”, such as wrapping my head in garlands, and crowning myself as an eventual “relic” and embodiment of the enshrined Kali. When viewed during rehearsals, it was clear that the “epic” nature of the projections required no movement.

⁶¹ *Shakti Peethas* are sacred Goddess sites based on Hindu mythology. Lord Shiva's wife Sati, who killed herself in retaliation to her father's insult to Shiva, her husband. Crazy with rage and grief, Lord Shiva carried her body in his arms, across the continent towards his home in the Himalayas. Fearing his violent grief would unbalance the cosmos, Vishnu cut her body into fifty-two pieces, which were scattered all over the earth. These fifty-two sacred body parts of the Goddess (mainly in Bengal) are the sites of Hindu pilgrimage. Some are represented as cave formations, others that represent the actual body parts of the Goddess. The most powerful *Shakti peeth* of all is one in Assam, where the *yonis* (female sex) of the goddess was said to have fallen. It is a site sacred to specifically Tantric Hindu worshippers.

⁶² These sacred goddess sites are described in *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Fuller, 2004 p. 44),



Fig. 65. Rakini Devi, *Urban Kali* performance image by Heidrun Löhr, 2017.

Conclusion

I conclude this thesis, having addressed how sacred Hindu iconography might translate to secular, feminist performance. The principal concept explored throughout the research is the idea of "tradition as transgression", supported by artists and theorists who engage in similar practices or investigations. By elaborating on the major influences that led to this scholarly research, I have also presented the main theme of this research, that of my use of Kali iconography as feminist performance activism. In researching several scholarly sources, I have also extended my investigation of female shame and the contexts in which such concepts prevail globally.



Fig. 66. Rakini Devi, *Urban Kali* performance image by Heidrun Löhr, 2017.

In 2015, when I presented my Research Proposal Review, the response was that there were at least four separate subjects that could be the focus of scholarly investigations, including the comparisons between the Mexican Catholic Madonna and Kali, addressing misogyny in both India and Mexico. In view of my Catholic convent education and my childhood in post-colonial Independent India, my interests in Christian female iconography intensified with the creation of my 2010 *Female Pope* persona. As a consequence, my initial

investigation for this thesis was titled *Kali Madonna*, and would have explored the connection to European Christian iconography, but ultimately it was decided that this research would focus on my own performance practice.



Fig. 67. *Urban Kali* performance image by Heidrun Löhr, Sept. 2017.

The research led me down many fascinating pathways including that of the Greek mythological Medusa, whose iconography I had researched along with the work of Latin American women artists and Middle Eastern artists, but could not be included in this project. While this thesis was confined specifically to my own interpretation of Kali culture and Indian classical dance traditions within a predominantly visual practice, it serves as a starting point for further research. For example, female ascetics in both European Christian and Asian (Hindu and Buddhist) culture are another interesting topic that may link my preoccupation with female iconography as both feminist and socially aware performance.

Both my creative and written research for *Urban Kali* I hope, will contribute to a greater understanding of the developing area of intercultural performance.

Whilst my earlier dance practice sought to contribute to intercultural dance in an Australian context, *Urban Kali* addressed the evolution of that practice, leading to future research in the field of feminist performance activism.

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Glossary of Sanskrit terms used in the context of Indian classical dance tradition

Abhinaya: Expressive dance

Bharatanatyam: One of seven Indian classical dance styles

Bhavam: expression (used in dance)

Devadasi: Indian temple dancer meaning literally "servers of god"

Digambar: Sky -clad, clad in space, reference to Kali

Dowry: Bride price paid by the bride's family to the groom's family

Durga: The ten-armed warrior Goddess in Hindu mythology

Geeta-Govinda: Devotional poetry written by the 12th century poet Jayadeva.

Guru: teacher

Kalika: One of several names of the Goddess Kali

Kathak: One of seven Indian classical dance styles

Kathakali :One of seven Indian classical dance styles

Kolkata: City in West Bengal, India

Kuchipudi :One of seven Indian classical dance styles

Kundlini: Cosmic female energy

Manipuri: One of seven Indian classical dance styles

Mindimi: Burmese word for princess/royal woman

Mohini Attam: One of seven Indian classical dance styles

Mudras (hand gestures)

Natya: dance drama

Natyam: dance

Natyashastra: teachings on dance

Nritta: Pure dance without any emotions or narrative

Nritya: Dance that incorporates movement and expression

Odissi: One of seven Indian classical dance styles

Odisha: (Indian State)

*The **name** of the state was changed from **Orissa** to **Odisha**, and the **name** of its language from Oriya to Odia, in 2011, by the passage of the **Orissa** (Alteration of **Name**) Bill, 2010 and the Constitution (113th Amendment) Bill, 2010 in the Parliament.*

Ragam: Music

Sati or Suttee: Practice of widow immolation on her husband's funeral pyre

Shakti: Female energy in Tantric Hinduism

Sharam: shame (Hindi)

Talam: Rythmn

Yantra: Sacred Hindu diagram

APPENDIX

Rakini Devi: INTERCULTURAL CONTEMPORARY DANCE PERFORMANCES 1990- 2017

Contents

1. Rakini Devi 's Kalika Dance Company performances 1990-1998.
2. Rakini Devi Performances 1998 -2017.
3. Reviews of *Urban Kali* Doctoral presentation, Sept. 2017.
4. Performances, Papers and Residencies: 2014-2017 (DCA research related activities 2014-2017)

1. Rakini Devi 's Kalika Dance Company performances 1990-1998.

Graves Slaves and Kalika 1990

Artrage Festival, Customs House, Fremantle

Rakini Devi (Choreographer/Performer)

Dancers: Warrick Williams, Garry Finch,
Chris Walsh.

Live music by Diego Bosco ensemble.

Daughters of Daksa 1991

PICA (Perth Institute of Contemporary Art)

Rakini Devi's Atman Project

Rakini Devi (Choreographer/Performer)

Dancers:

Warrick Williams, Bremini Ganeson, Gabby Miller, Imelda King.

Live music by Diego Bosco ensemble.

Review:

"Rakini's devotional piece explores the duality of our relationship between the spiritual and the non-spiritual. It is also a celebration and affirmation of life."

David Hough, *Dance Australia*, Dec.1992.

Suttee 1992

Artrage Festival, PICA

Rakini Devi: Solo Dance theatre.

Live Music: Composer and Flautist: Cat Hope.

Masks and prop: Cecile Williams.

Mudrasa 1993

Artrage Festival, PICA, Kalika Dance Company

Rakini Devi (Choreographer/Performer)

Dancers:

Bremini Ganeson, Renata Smenda, Dawn Jackson.

Film

Super 8 film by John Harrison and Ashley de Prazer.

Radha & The Elements of Worship 1994

PICA

Kalika Dance Company

Rakini Devi (Choreographer/Performer)

Dancers:

Bremini Ganeson, Dawn Jackson, Renata Smenda, Billie Cook.

Live music:

Carnatic Vocals: Jeya Ponnuthurai

Reg Zar: Drums

Didgeridoo: Stephen Compton.

Review

"After bold choreographic experiments with contemporary dance theatre since 1990, Radha and the elements of worship is Rakini's definitive statement. It is a delicate blend of dance, art, poetry and music, masterfully balanced and beautifully presented"

Lynn Fisher, *The West Australian*, August 1994.

Kali Digambar 1995

PICA

Kalika Dance Company

Rakini Devi (Choreographer/Performer)

Dancers:

Dawn Jackson, Renata Smenda, Billie Cook, Hylton Jaggard

Live Music

Carnatic vocals: Jeya Ponnuthurai

Reg Zar; percussion

Stephen Compton: Didgeridoo

Reviews:

" In trying to explore the mythology behind this great goddess, at the same time pursuing her interest in cross-cultural dance, Rakini has interspersed the choreography with a haunting film sequence shot in macabre, shadowy monochrome, created by John Harrison. In contrast to the shadowy film, the dancers are alive with menace, dressed in black, red and gold. The four women- Dawn Jackson, Renata Smenda, Billie Cook and Rakini- have the distinctive kohl-lined eyes and their foreheads are painted red above the thick curved eyebrows. In the centre of the brow is the third eye. Their waist-length hair tied back with red flowers, they drip with jewels from ears, neck, arms, waist and ankles. Their feet and hands are stained and decorated with red dye. It is visually electric."

"... Rakini is a superb dancer whose ability to seemingly dislocate her neck, arms, hands and feet from her body, thereby telling the narrative through a myriad of simultaneous movements and eye-rolling perspicacity, is awe-inspiring".

Rita Clarke, *The Australian*, May 26, 1995.

"The dancers spend a lot of time off their feet, which will horrify the Indian dance purists but being upside down, balancing on each other's bodies and lying flat on the floor are elements that work in Kali. I found the recurring image of pairs of upside down faces particularly dramatic. The artistic qualities of Kali are very fine. A vivid red triangle painted on the floor is repeated in the dancers' costumes and in their red-painted foreheads."

Lynn Fisher, *The West Australian*, May 26, 1995.



Kali Digambar, Kalika Dance Company image by Ashley De Prazer, 1995.

Zenana (The Women's Quarters) 1996

PICA Artrage Festival

Kalika Dance Company

Rakini Devi (Choreographer/Performer)

Dancers:

Renata Smenda, Priya Srinivasen.

Live Music: Cat Hope (Bass guitar) Kevin Hawkins (Classical Indian violin)

Narration: Sushma Paul

Yantra and Devadasis 1997

The Quarry, WA

Kalika Dance Company

Rakini Devi (Choreographer/Performer)

Dancers:

Lena John, Dawn Jackson, Helen King, Imelda King, Warrick Williams, Billie Cook, Natasha Rolfe, Angela Macdonald-Booth, Alicia Moran.

Guest artist: Ambika Docherty (*Bharatam Dance Company* Melbourne)

Musicians for Yantra

Jeya Ponnuthurai (vocalist),

Kevin Hawkins (Violinist)

Mohan Sathyanath (Mrdangam -South Indian percussion).

Musicians for *Devadasis*

Sivalinga Sahathevan (*Vocalist*)

Balasri Rasiah (*Mrdangam*)

Ammula Satyavathi (*Violinist*)

Program Notes on *Yantra*

"In creating this work, I have used the structural synthesis of the Sri Yantra, which revolves around a nine-fold division; and expansion of three. These nine divisions are divided into three groups of three to denote the three phases of creation, preservation and dissolution. The concept of the nine Shiva-Shakti triangles (representing the male/female principal) split into triads, was the basis of this work.

" Rakini Devi (Perth 1997).

Reviews for Kalika Dance Company 1991-1998

"After bold choreographic experiments with contemporary dance theatre since 1990, Radha and the elements of worship is Rakini's definitive statement. It is a delicate blend of dance, art, poetry and music, masterfully balanced and beautifully presented"

Lynn Fisher, *The West Australian*, August 1994

2. Rakini Devi Performances 1998 -2017

The Virtual Goddess 1998

The Virtual Goddess National Tour: Byron Bay (*The Epicentre*), Sydney (*Performance Space*) and Canberra (*Choreographic Centre*) (June 12 to 27 1998).

Live music: Cat Hope

Reviews:

Putting in the Virtual Slipper

"Rakini is like Halley's comet, too rare and too fleeting. Visible briefly in Byron Bay,

she performs for a mere three days in Sydney and will spend another three in Canberra, then return to Perth, taking her talent, her irony and her wit with her.

Mind you, anyone who dares parody both New Age idiocy and the sillier shores of modern dance and who does it as well as she does is wise to present a fast moving target. In the relatively few minutes of the "Virtual Goddess" segment of her current program, with just a few well chosen and well aimed words and movements--"The immigrant Dance", she murmurs, walking slack-jawed, backwards in circles carrying a pair of imaginary suitcases, "It can go on for hours"-she puts the slipper right where it belongs, between the wind of hot air and the water of ersatz passion. She is no kinder about the commercialism that underlies New Age nonsense. No dear, there will be no discounts to those who were temple dancers in a former life. It's quite savage and laugh out loud funny.

The evening's power comes from "Suttee", Rakini's contemporary work inspired, if that's the word, "by the Hindu ritual of widow immolation". It's a terrifying, haunting piece, of shape changing floating drapery and masks, nightmarish and deeply disturbing. The final work "Rising" "a work on disempowering pain" is no more comfortable, but a lot more hard-edged and much less likely to surface at three in the morning.

The collaboration between Rakini and musician/composer Cat Hope make for a rich and satisfying evening, catch it before it disappears over the horizon."

Sonia Humphrey, *The Australian*, June 17, 1998.

Virtual Goddess Proves a real hit

"And it's very amusing: a satire in words and movement on the ease with which New Age entrepreneurs find a market with half-baked borrowings from ancient traditions. Her birth inheritance and dance styles cross over several distinct Asian cultures, which she mingles and parodies to witty effect in this item..... Rakini obviously applies her dance knowledge with serious integrity in the influences she draws from - as distinct from her imaginary Goddess.....she extends her reach into broader symbolic themes of identity and change."

Jill Sykes, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 17, 1998.

Mirror On Contemporary Values

"In her originality, Rakini holds a mirror to contemporary values, which, from a traditional perspective, appear, shallow, artificial and material. In her mastery of two diverse cultures, she creates a new synthesis, which is intelligible, powerful and entertaining."

Larry Ruffell, *Canberra Times*, June 25, 1998.

R.E.M. (Rapid Eye Mudras) 1999

PICA *Dancers are Space Eaters*.

Sound: Cat Hope (Abe Sada)

Review:

"Rakini's R.E.M. (Rapid Eye Mudras) were by turn titillating, captivating, thought provoking and yes, she did dance, and I thought how much can be said with just one swirling hand. Yet it was her text that made this a very funny performance."

Grisha Dolgoplov, *Dancers are Space Eaters* 1999.

Mindimi The Burmese Princess 1999

PICA 13-21 August 1999

Rakini Devi: Solo Dance Theatre (Choreography, script and concept)

Director and Dramaturg: Sally Richardson

Set Designer: Vinn Pitcher

Lighting design: Graham Walne

Composer: Cat Hope

Reviews:

"Rakini continually, and satisfyingly, surprises with the border less circumference of her discipline...she moves through her history aided by a formidably talented team, not least Cat Hope, who creates original, engagingly interesting music, including the feminists' dream sound of shattering glass.....Since Rakini is such a beautiful expressive dancer- you can lose yourself in the antics of her flashing eyes and the angular gestures of neck, hands and feet-more art and less natter (apologies to Will..) would give the performance edge. But there are moments of

fascinating diversity and intense richness- Rakini in a rouched oyster satin dress strolling with a painted parasol, the music, the photography and paintings, the trek and the last Indian dance, with Rakini clad in saffron, eyes flashing and feet stamping."

(Rita Clarke, *The Australian*, August 16th 1999).

"Rakini's choreography utilizes both mime and more abstract upper body movements such as sinuous arms, splayed fingers and undulating wrists. These elements mesh most effectively in a dark segment relating the ordeals Rakini's mother endured while trekking from Burma to India in WW2. Rakini presents a symbolic dance encapsulating both the physical and psychological pain of exile. She bows repeatedly, in a parody of obedient submission, glances over her shoulder, fights off invisible tormentors, twitches, half mad with despair... In contrast, more light-hearted events are recalled using direct speech.....here, as in other parts of *Mindimi*, the humor and pathos is as much in Rakini's ear for gossip and elastic facial expressions as in the stories themselves. Towards the end, Rakini takes the opportunity to have a witty go at New Age trends in dance, then at critics and others who have misunderstood her craft. If her intention is to unsettle us with this abrupt, satirical shift, she succeeds, though it is surprising that an artist of such obvious caliber would waste time lamenting what others think of her. This aside, *Mindimi* is a work of considerable artistry, a fine homage to the dancer's family and an inspiring example of cross-cultural diversity."

(Naomi Millett, *Dance Australia* 1999)

Claustrophobia 2001-2002

Claustrophobia #1: Totem Bar Perth Fringe Festival with live music: Cat Hope & Gata Negra

Sound composition for performances 2-4: Cat Hope

Claustrophobia #2: Kei Takei's Moving Earth Studio, Tokyo 2001

Claustrophobia #3: Tokyo Performing Arts Market, 2002

Claustrophobia #4: Bodies Festival Newtown Theatre, Sydney, 2002

Claustrophobia #5: Antistatic Dance Festival, Performance Space, Sydney, with cellist Liberty Kerr.

Kyoko No Mudra 2001

Rakini Devi *Asialink* artist residency, Tokyo (Oct-Dec 2001)

Choreography: Rakini Devi

Dancers:

Keiko Takaya Dance Company (26 member troupe).

Calcutta Manga 2001



Calcutta Manga #1. PICA, Image by Alin Huma 2001.

Calcutta Manga #1: PICA, Perth (2001)

Calcutta Manga #2: Dance Tracks, The Studio, Sydney Opera House, (2002)

Calcutta Manga #3: Jade Next Wave Festival, Tokyo (2002)

*Calcutta Manga #4: FiiDA (International Festival of Independent Dancers)
Toronto (2003)*

Calcutta Manga #5: Future Human Studio, New York (2003).

Rakini Devi: Choreographer/performer

Sound: Rachael Dease

Filmmaker: Nancy Jones



Calcutta Manga #3: Jade Next Wave Festival, Tokyo (2002), Photographer unknown.

Qu 2003

1. *Qu: Omeo Dance Studio, Sydney (2003)*
2. *Qu: Bodies Festival, Dancehouse Melbourne (2003)*

Percussionist: Darren Moore

Video projection design: Alin Huma

***Woman In Transit 2002* (Australia Council Dance Fellowship)**

Performance Space Sydney

Sound: Cat Hope

Dramaturgy consultant: Nigel Kellaway

Production manager, lighting design: Simon Wise.

Mindimi Trek (2002-2007)

Mindimi Trek: FiiDA (International Festival of Independent Dancers), *Buddies In Bad Times Theatre*, Toronto (2003).

Mindimi Trek: Future Human Studio New York (2003)

Sound score by Cat Hope.

Mindimi Trek Dancehouse, Short Shorts Dance Festival, Melbourne (2007)

Sound by Robin Fox.

Mindimi Trek: Adishakti Theatre, Pondicherry, India (2007), Sound by Cat Hope.

Kali Yuga 2004

The Lennox, Riverside Theatres (Western Sydney Dance Action & Arts NSW)

Rakini Devi: Choreographer/performer

Principal Dancers:

Rakini Devi, Kenny Feather, Nelson Requera, Katy Alexandra Macdonald, Cherie Goddard, Miranda Wheen and third-year students of the University of Western Sydney.

Video Artist: Sam James

Sound artists: Matt Earle and Adam Sussman

Production and lighting design: Simon Wise

Latex costume accessories: Jason Patten

Costume design and make up: Rakini Devi

Reviews:

"The costumes echo the martial theme. Hands, feet, eyes are painted in blood red, mouths covered with black sashes. The binary of seeing but silent eyes, and peerless but speaking mouths seems reversed; particularly when the women, while performing backbends, present inverted faces to the audience. The eyes look like red mouths, 'speaking' to us, penetrating the inky audience space. The program notes tells us that Rakini Devi is concerned with the "sacred" and "taboo" as they affect women. At this point the silence of the female dancers is emphasised, but their eyes suggest they know of the blackness of war, death, injustice and unhappiness."

Melina Rose Jewell, *RealTime Arts Magazine* #62, Sept. 2004.

"Kali worship emphasises the cyclical aspect of life, and Kali Yuga begins with video projection of ancient dances being performed against a backdrop of trains and freeways, wire fences and smog. (....) Beautiful, fascinating and hypnotic but often opaque, the work tells its own story in its own way, intricate and incomprehensible as life itself"

Jacqueline Pascoe, *Dance Australia* August 2004.

Opening video sequence by Sam James from *Kali Yuga*:

<https://vimeo.com/137667431>

Threshold 2005

The Lennox, Riverside Theatres (WSDA Western Sydney Dance Action)

Rakini Devi: Choreographer/performer

Dancers:

Kenny Feather, Alexandra Macdonald, Miranda Wheen

Percussionist and composer: Darren Moore

Lighting design: Neil Simpson.

"Threshold is a play on the feature in Photoshop that makes images starkly black and white, and also a play on meaning, to be on the edge or brink of an experience. The threshold of pain, joy, patience, or discovery is explored in an environment of intimacy, which is heightened by the exciting urgency of live percussion."

Rakini Devi, program notes in *Upstream Riverside Theatres Update* Autumn Edition 2005.

Disturbing Elements 2008

Culmination of *Asialink* residency demonstrating choreographic integration of Tai Chi Martial arts and Indian dance vocabulary and text referencing female infanticide in India as researched during an Asialink residency (2007).

Carlton Courthouse, Melbourne.

Dancers:

Rakini Devi and Kenny Feather

Script and concept: Rakini Devi

Dance collaboration: Kenny Feather

Photographer & Projection design: Mayu Kanamori.

<http://vimeo.com/47874983> (at 8.44 min.)

Rakini Devi's artwork projections for *Disturbing Elements*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfHHiE9r7Dk>

Calcutta Underground 2008

Terrain Dance Festival, Dancehouse, Melbourne.

Dancers:

Rakini Devi and Kenny Feather

Video link featuring above performance.

<https://vimeo.com/137667431> (at 1.24min)

Calcutta Underground 2009 (solo performance)

PALA Indonesia: Performance Art Laboratory and Undisclosed territories: Tejakula Bali, and Solo, Indonesia.

Curators: Boris Neilsony (Black Market International) and Melati Suryadumo (Germany & Indonesia).

The Human Shrine 2009

PALA: Undisclosed Territories: Solo, Indonesia.

First site-specific performance installation, set in a natural cave grotto/shrine to Our Lady.

The Construction Of Memory 2009

Cultural Intersections Series, Fitzroy Town Hall

Presented by Multicultural Arts Victoria, Ausdance Victoria, and the City of Yarra, the Cultural Intersections Series explored the process of experimentation of new creative processes in an intercultural context.

Rakini Devi: Dancer

Jess Ipkendanz: Musician and performer

Leila Koren: Photographer/Film maker.

"British India, Ruth St Denis, and the untold stories that lie within the walls of Colonial architecture - these are some of the inspirations for Rakini's new work. Utilizing the historical architecture of the Fitzroy Town Hall, the artists create memories of stately homes in colonial India, of large stone temples and grand

mansions of days gone by. Untold stories abound in stone and wood - a glimpse of the past and memories of a bygone era"

Rakini Devi, 2009.

(http://www.multiculturalarts.com.au/events2009/cultural_intersections_showing1.shtml)

Link to performance: <https://vimeo.com/137667431> (at 6.10min.)

Kali Digambari 2010

Asian Body Festival, Stockholm, Sweden

Full-length solo dance work.

Sound: Cat Hope

The Female Pope & Audience with the Female Pope (2010 ongoing)

The Female Pope: Art Contact, Helsinki, Finland, 2010

The Female Pope: Friction International Live Art Festival, Uppsala Cathedral, Sweden, 2010.

Audience with the Female Pope, Art Museum, Uppsala, Sweden, 2010.

<http://vimeo.com/47874983> (at 6.31 min.)

Audience with the Female Pope: Performance Space, Carriageworks, Sydney 2013, <http://vimeo.com/47874983> (at 4.min.)

Audience with The Female Pope: The Grayzone, New York (Grace Exhibition Space), 2014, <http://vimeo.com/47874983> (at 3.min).

The Punishment of Pope Joan 2012

Club 86, Melbourne.

Performance installation.

The Two Madonnas 2014

Performance installation with Violeta Luna

Ex Teresa Museum, Mexico City.

<http://vimeo.com/47874983> (at 4.37min.)

Kali Madonna 2014

Seven-week Friday durational performance installation in a shop window, *Village Bizarre*, The Rocks, Sydney, Nov-Dec 2014.

<https://vimeo.com/120928241> (opening)

<https://vimeo.com/137667431> (at 8.12 min.)

U.F.O. (Unidentified Female Object) 2015

In this new site- specific work, Rakini Devi explores the theme of “alien” in the Australian bush, inspired by her concept of the post apocalyptic female, female as foreign object in a strange environment, and the solitude of the displaced. Characteristic of her unique style of creating hybrid personae including The Female Pope, The Widow, and The Human Shrine, UFO extends her enquiry into female iconography, and the myriad allegorical portraiture of feminine identities. UFO also investigates the cultural frameworks that inform the public’s interpretation of ‘feral’, this year’s theme for *Siteworks* 2015. (Rakini Devi, 2015).

Choreography and installation by Rakini Devi

Sound by Cat Hope

Costumes by Evangelos Laios and Jason Patten

Performance Photography Heidrun Löhr

<https://vimeo.com/145014222>

3. Reviews of *Urban Kali* Doctoral presentation, Sept.22-23 2017.

"To one side is a vivid installation — a miniature pandal, a temporary street temple made for festivals — built around a tiny statuette of Kali. Mid-left, is an enigmatic tall fabric cone, dressed with a chain of skulls and red thread evoking the blood often seen on Kali’s tongue."

Face to Face with Kali, Keith Gallasch, *Realtime* Sept. 2017.

"The accompanying music too is contemporary urban, not faux Indian; it breathes like an agitated monster, signalling this is our Kali, now, but irrevocably ancient, as the ritualistic stage framing suggests".

Face to Face with Kali, Keith Gallasch, *Realtime* Sept. 2017.

Scene One: Opening video sequence

"An ancient diagram turns slowly in the video that opens the performance of Urban Kali, at its centre images of the goddess, each embodied by Rakini Devi, staring eyes and dancing fingers in close-up, all veiled behind shooting flames."

Face to Face with Kali, Keith Gallasch, *Realtime* Sept. 2017.

Scene Two: *The Never Ending Sari* dance

"Devi/Kali steps into this ceremonial space, hands aloft, drawing behind her a long swathe of red sari cloth. The thump and soft belling of the music confirm that hers is a procession in which the sari is laid as a path along which she treads with gentle steps and spare gestures before gathering it up as if, like blood, it is a sacred substance."

Face to Face with Kali, Keith Gallasch, *Realtime*, Sept. 2017.

Scene Three: *The Black Bee* Video sequence

"In the video that ensues, we are in jolting proximity with the goddess in close-ups of demanding eyes and red-daubed dancing feet juxtaposed with a growling meditative "Ommmm..." Devi's voiceover celebrates love for the goddess — her feet, her skin (the deepest of close-ups) — and the void, the blackness, she embodies." *Face to Face with Kali*, Keith Gallasch, *Realtime*, Sept. 2017.

Scene Four: *Dark Drum* dance

"The choreography is a blend of classical Indian dance and "contemporary", with a definite Indian base. Devi has a regal carriage and rigid yet fluid torso, a very flexible back and rippling, circling arms with, at times, undulating flower-like hands in the traditional mudras (hand gestures). At one point, Devi performs a backward heel walk. There is also use of the deep Indian pli  . Toward the end, there is a "contemporary"-style slither backward, leading to some strong floor work."

Lynne Lancaster, *Dance Informa*, Sept. 2017.

"Bands of soft colour vibrate across the screen before which Kali stands, one focused solely on her eyes. Staccato drumming settles into a regular pulse and

the body, covered in black, breaks into wide-stanced, right-angled articulations, stampings, red-palmed hands turning in and out".

Face to Face with Kali, Keith Gallasch, *Realtime*, Sept. 2017.

Scene Five: Female Infanticide video sequence

"In an utterly chilling video sequence a pair of bloodied hands are suspended directly above a bucket of water in a dance of guilt-laden anguish as Devi explicitly details the horrors of female child murder in India, including the words of some of the perpetrators, victims of another kind".

Face to Face with Kali, Keith Gallasch, *Realtime*, Sept. 2017.

"Devi mixes traditional Indian classical dance with visual images and sound effects in her interpretation of these themes. An unsettling example is the image of disembodied blood covered hands wringing over a basin of blood while a voice over chillingly describes the many and horrifying ways in which new born baby girls have been murdered".

Carol Wimmer, *Stage Whispers*, Sept. 2017.

"The most disturbing features were the details of the once-prevalent⁶³ practice of female infanticide. The most compelling vignettes were captured in close-up, depicting strong images of bloodied hands in the shape of a womb and in a subsequent scene where Devi's hands signified both the perpetrator and victim in ritual sacrifices of stranglings and suffocations, chokings and secret burials of shame".

Vicki van Hout, FORM Dance blog, 22.09.2017.

Final Scene

"This might be Kali, the mother her many followers believe her to be, and whom we finally meet fully face to face in the last scene in a blaze of glory, framed by a huge image of an eternally deep cave — not black, but a soft haven, a macrocosm seemingly made from a close-up of gently ruffled cloth and textured

⁶³ The only inaccuracy of this review, are the words "once prevalent", when in fact female infanticide is very much a current practice.

with a lovely half-melody. Urban and atheist as I am, I might not believe in Kali, but I welcome the emotionally complex connotations that swirl about her and acknowledge that for a secular society she has the power to evoke the sheer scale of the epic recurrency, individual and social, of the glory and the trauma that constitute life and death. Rakini Devi has given me a Kali to keep and reflect on".

Keith Gallasch, *Realtime* 2017.

4. DCA performance research related activities: Performances, Papers, and Residencies: 2014-2017

April 2016 Q-Lab Residency

2-week space residency at the Mullins Theatre, Joan Sutherland Art Centre, Penrith, NSW. Developed film and staging concepts in collaboration with filmmaker Sam James.

Outcome: 10 min video of the first stage development with sound by Karl Ford. This video was presented at the BOLD conference and festival, (Canberra, March 2017), and at *Dance Massive* Open Studio presentation (Malthouse Theatres, Melbourne, March 2017).

June 2016: DAIR Dance Residency #1.

DAIR Ausdance NSW one- week space residency at *Readymade* studio, Sydney. Outcome: Beginning of choreographic content of the new work. Self- documented video and photography. Additional photo documentation by Heidrun Lohr.

Dec 2016-Jan 2017

India: Three-week trip attending *Chennai Music Academy* Classical Indian Dance Festival.

Outcome: Met with Leela Samson, choreographer and dancer (cited in the exegesis) and attended her solo and company shows. Attended a dance performance by Chandralekha dance troupe (cited in my exegesis).

Visited *Nrityagram* (The Dance Village) Where I first studied Odissi in 1991, and with whom I have a long-standing relationship. Witnessed classes and rehearsals, and attended their performance in Chennai.

Feb 2017 DAIR Dance Residency #2.

DAIR studio residency #2 at RAD (Royal Academy of Dance, Sydney)

Outcome: One week choreographic development of first solo in *Urban Kali*'s work in progress titled *The Never Ending Sari*.

March 2017: *Bold Festival* Canberra

Papers & Presentations

Paper 1: "Odissi: History and characteristics of Odissi Classical Dance", BOLD Conference, National Library, Canberra.

Paper 2: "Sacred to Secular in Urban Kali": A PP presentation on my DCA research subject and the new work in progress.

BOLD Festival Dance Performance: *The Never Ending Sari*: Q2 Theatre Canberra: Curated by Liz Lea.

April 2017 Melbourne *Dance Massive* Open Studios Program

Paper *Urban Kali, A work in Progress*: Open Studios Event as part of *Dance Massive* conference and festival, presented by Ausdance Vic and NSW, *Malthouse Theatre*, Melbourne.

May 2017 *Readymade Studio* Residency

One-week studio residency with sound and video artist Karl Ford, developing video and sound concepts for *Urban Kali*.

Performances Installations 2014- 2017

DCA Research-related live art performances exploring sacred to secular themes in public spaces and galleries.

2014 The Two Madonnas: Mexico City, one month collaborative work with Mexican artist Violeta Luna, presented at Ex Teresa Arte Actual Museum, Mexico City.

The Female Pope: Presented at the Grayzone, New York.

2014 Kali Madonna: The Rocks, *Village Bizarre*, 5 -week- 3-hour weekly durational performance installations.

2014 The Black Madonna (UOW), Wollongong, 30 min. Performance installation.

2015 UFO (Unidentified Female Object) Siteworks, Bundanon, NSW: Performance installation (Dance and canopy in the bush installation)

2015 Kali The Black Madonna Performance installation, *Firstdraft Gallery*, Sydney.

2016 Bengali In The Bush: Site-specific durational performance in mosquito net, with *basemetal collective* (Bilpin residency and laboratory).

2016 Urban Kali: 5-hour durational performance in mosquito net, *SAS Gallery*, Marrickville, Sydney, with *basemetal collective*.

2016 Hair of Kali: *Same Difference* live art performance with *basemetal* collective, Sydney CBD.

2016 Cone of Kali: 4-hour durational performance *107 Projects*, Redfern, curated by Julie Vulcan as part of *Rubber Neck*.

2017 Handfed: Performance at MCA as part of Jiva Jehanathan Parthipan's curated *Handfed* as part of MCA's *Conversation Starters* program.